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By James B. Hendryx

Connie Morgan in Alaska
Connie Morgan with the Mounted
Connie Morgan in the Lumber Camps
Connie Morgan in the Fur Country
Connie Morgan in the Cattle Country
The Promise
The Gun Brand
The Texan
The Gold Girl
Prairie Flowers
Snowdrift
North

The whole remuda swept on up the bench and into the Valley

CONNIE MORGAN
IN THE
CATTLE COUNTRY

BY

JAMES B. HENDRYX

AUTHOR OF "CONNIE MORGAN IN ALASKA," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PAINTINGS
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Waseche Bill Tells a Story	3
II.	Kobuk Jack	16
III.	Two Dot Townsend	28
IV.	Bob Harmon	42
V.	At the Round Seven	50
VI.	Learning the Ropes	57
VII.	Connie Meets a Neighbor	71
VIII.	Tex	86
IX.	Harmon Talks	96
X.	Left Handed Branding Irons	108
XI.	The Wagons Roll	117
XII.	Harmon Shows his Hand	132
XIII.	The Sage Brush Corral	148
XIV.	The "Greenness" of Connie Morgan	163

CHAPTER	PAGE
XV.—I. W. W.	177
XVI.—Fire	192
XVII.—In the Bad Lands	208
XVIII.— The Outlaw.	224
XIX.—At the Agency	242
XX.—Connie Calls a Bluff	256
XXI.—The Cowboys Help Out	270
XXII.—A Riding Job	280
XXIII.—Connie Listens to a Proposition	296

ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

THE WHOLE REMUDA SWEPT ON UP THE BENCH AND INTO THE VALLEY . . *Frontispiece*

"AN' I KEPT A-GOIN' TILL IT PETERED OUT, AN' I WAS LOST" 16

AS THEY PASSED ALONG THE STREET CONNIE TOOK IN THE DETAILS OF THE LITTLE COW TOWN 32

CONNIE FOUND HIMSELF HOLDING ON FOR DEAR LIFE AS THE WHEELS WOULD DROP SUDDENLY INTO A BOTTOMLESS CHUCK HOLE AND EMERGE, DROPPING HUGE CHUNKS OF GRAY ALKALI MUD 64

THE SHEEPMAN EYED HIM WITH A HOSTILE GLARE. "WHY DIDN'T YOU RIDE RIGHT THROUGH 'EM?" HE ASKED 96

A MOMENT LATER THE MUZZLES OF FOUR RIFLES WERE THRUST THROUGH FOUR APERTURES IN THE SAGEBRUSH THAT WAS LOOSELY WOVEN BETWEEN THE WIRES OF THE FENCE 128

PAGE

HARMON'S FACE WAS GHASTLY PALE AS HE ELEVATED BOTH HANDS HIGH ABOVE HIS HEAD 164

. . . THEN FROZE IN HIS TRACKS AS HE FOUND HIMSELF STARING INTO THE MUZZLE OF THE BOY'S SERVICE REVOLVER . . . 196

Connie Morgan in the Cattle Country

Connie Morgan in the Cattle Country

CHAPTER I

WASECHE BILL TELLS A STORY

"THIS little cabin sure looks good to me," smiled Connie Morgan on the evening of his hasty return from the Mackenzie River country, as he and Waseche Bill settled themselves comfortably in front of the little stove. "No matter where I am, or what I'm doing, I always think of this little cabin on Ten Bow. It makes a fellow feel good just to know it's here, and you're here, and I can come back any time I want to." The boy paused and glanced affectionately at his big partner, who was smiling behind the bowl of his black pipe. "It isn't that I don't like the trail," he added quickly, "because I do—and the longer the trail,

the better I like it. And I like to have something to do that takes me into places I never have been before—and I like to tackle jobs I have never tackled before—just to see if I can do them. But, all the same, I always want to know that this cabin is right here just as it was when we built it. I'll tell you what it is—it's *home*. A fellow likes to know he's got a home, no matter where the trail takes him—and this is home for us. And, say, Waseche, you won't ever tear it down while I'm away somewhere, will you? I'd rather have it just the way it is than have the biggest house in the world."

"Sho', now, son," the voice of Waseche Bill rumbled from behind a cloud of blue tobacco smoke, "sho', now. That's plumb foolishness."

"Oh, it is, is it?" flashed the boy. "Well then, you tell me why that big flume runs along the other bank of the creek instead of this bank?"

"The big flume? Why it runs down the crick to carry water to the sluices, of co'se."

"But," persisted the boy, "why does it run along the other side of the creek instead of this side?"

"Cain's the engineer of this here outfit,"

grinned the man. "I reckon it's on the other side 'cause Cain built it there."

Connie laughed: "You're a big bluffer, Waseche! Don't you suppose I know you love this cabin just as much as I do? Anyone with any sense could see that that flume could have been built along this bank with half the work it took to build it there. I asked Cain when I came back from the lumber woods, and he told me all about it. He said that when you looked at the blue print, and found out that this cabin would have to be torn down to make way for the flume, you told him to put it on the other side, no matter how much it cost—so there!"

"H-u-m-m," grinned Waseche Bill, "Cain's plumb gabby, ain't he? But, son, you don't need to worry about this here cabin. It's the onliest home I ever had since befo' I kin remember. An' Cain's got his orders about leavin' it where it's at. I told him if the sills was restin' on a solid chunk of gold, the gold could lay there till the last log rotted an' the roof caved in. It's all foolishness, that-a-way, but—shucks! Gold ain't everything!"

"Well, now I'm here," said the boy, "tell me

about that scrap we're going to have with that outfit from the States."

"We ain't goin' to have none," answered Waseche Bill, laconically.

"You don't mean you're figuring on selling out?" cried the boy.

"No—only jest, we stay where we're at—an' so do they."

Connie laughed: "How did you work it, Waseche?"

"Who, me? Why, I didn't do nothin', except tell 'em they'd have to wait till my pardner come back. They was five of 'em in the outfit an' they stayed at the hotel. The boys kind of got to inquirin' around what they were doin' here, an' I told 'em they was aimin' fer to drive me an' you out of the country. The next night Black Jack Demeree, an' MacDougal, an' Dutch Henry, an' a lot more of the sourdoughs called a miner's meetin'. I didn't go to it. But, next day the outfit pulled out. Seems like the boys sent out an' brung these here fellows in on a snowshoe warrant, an' they was speeches made by some considerable of the boys. I don't know jest what they said, but after they'd got through, the head man of the

outfit gets up an' he says how they'd decided not to locate on Ten Bow—that the formation wasn't just right to suit 'em, or the water, or somethin'—anyways, they pulled out—an' from what I heard, I ain't lookin' for 'em back." Waseche paused to fill his pipe, and Connie smiled to himself as he pictured the scene in the miner's meeting. A lump rose in his throat as he wondered what the sourdoughs had said—those big men of the North, who were his friends, and the friends of Waseche Bill.

Waseche tossed a burnt match into the wood box and his brow puckered as he puffed at his pipe. "They's another matter that's pesterin' me now," he said. "Seems like I'm, somehow, always a-gettin' into somethin' that I ain't got no business into, like that there timber deal down in Minnesota."

"We made good money out of it," reminded the boy.

"Yes, but we wouldn't if it hadn't be'n fer you goin' down there an' runnin' the thing. An' besides, we ain't got to make money, nohow. We got more comin' in right now out of the gravel here on Ten Bow than we know what to do with—an' that's where the trouble comes in."

"Sure we have," agreed the boy, quickly. "But, there's no fun in that. It was a game—and a big one, while we were getting a start. But, now we've got things going, there isn't any fun in just sitting down and weighing the dust. Do you know, in a way, I'm kind of sorry those fellows quit. It would have been fun fighting them. But, what's this new thing that's bothering you?"

Waseche Bill ran his fingers through his hair, and regarded the boy gravely. "Well, it's this-a-way: Me an' you is in the cattle business."

"The cattle business!" cried Connie, in surprise. "The cattle business up here! Why there isn't grass enough on Ten Bow to keep a caribou in the summer time—and what'll they do in winter?"

"This here cattle business ain't on Ten Bow. It ain't even in Alaska. It's in Montana."

Connie grinned. "Another job for me. When do I start?"

Waseche shook his head: "No, son, I don't reckon this here is any job fer you. You don't savvy the cattle business no more than Kobuk Jack did, an' it would git you."

"Maybe it would, and maybe it wouldn't,"

retorted the boy. "Anyway, I'm going to give it a chance to get me. I didn't know anything about the timber business either, when I tackled that Minnesota job, but it didn't take me long to learn——"

"That was sort of different," interposed Waseche Bill. "These here cowboys—I've heard tell about 'em—is plumb riotorous an' lawless to the extent which they ain't none regardful of human life whatever. They all pack guns, an' when they meet up they begin shootin' at one another, same like in this country we say *klahowya six*, or good mornin'."

Connie laughed: "I guess they're not as bad as all that. Dan McKeever has had a lot of experience with 'em down on the border, and he likes 'em. Of course there's good ones and bad ones among them the same as anyone else—and as for packing guns—I've got a Service revolver there that's just as good as any man's gun—and a little better than most. But loosen up and tell me something about this cattle deal. How did we get mixed up in it? And who is Kobuk Jack?"

"Well, it's this-a-way," began Waseche tilting his chair against the log wall, and stretching his

long legs straight out before him. "One time, a good many years before the big stampede, when I was nothin' but a *chechako*, I outfitted at Nulato an' headed North, not havin' no more idea what I was goin' up against, than a baby. Well, I kep' to the Koyukuk till I hit Hog River an' then headed up that, an' I kep' a-goin' till it petered out, an' I was lost. It was gittin' right into the shank of the winter. The days was gittin' shorter an' the nights longer, till the time come when I got sunrise an' sunset in one eyeful, an' the next day, an' for many a day after, they wasn't neither one. The snow was so deep an' soft that I couldn't make no time trailin' an' then my grub got to runnin' low. I was up against it—good an' strong. But I kep' pluggin'. If I made four or five miles a day I done well. The strong cold was on—forty an' fifty, an' even sixty below, an' when the cold would let up it snowed some more. Then I done it, the only time I ever done it—I killed a dog, an' for three days I lived off him an' fed the rest of the dogs. I had built a kind of a Siwash camp out of brush an' spruce saplin's 'cause I was too weak to trail through that snow. An' anyway, bein' as I didn't know where I was headin', one place was

as good as another—an' that means that all places was the worst they could be.

"Me an' the dogs finished the one I'd killed an' I was about to kill another, when sudden like, a voice speaks out hearty an' plain right behind me. 'Hold on, brother,' it said. 'Dogs pull better with the hide on!'

"I whirled around quick, not expectin' really to see no one. I thought it was—the end—that the voice was in my own brain. But, sure enough, there he stood, rearin' up as big as two men in the gloom—Kobuk Jack! Course I didn't know who he was—an' I didn't care. He was a human man, an' his outfit bulged on top of his toboggan. I couldn't say nothin'. Jest stood there an' gawped.

"Kobuk, he looked me over thorough, an' my empty sled, an' the skull of the dog that had be'n boiled fer soup till there wasn't a bite fer a no-see-em left on it, an' then he grinned. 'I'm Kobuk Jack,' he announced, abrupt, 'an' you're the dog-gondest fool of a *chechako* that's be'n invented. Where you headin'? An' what business you got up here in a man's country? Why ain't you back on the Yukon where you kin set comfortable an' spit on the stove of nights?'

" 'I guess you've got me right, Kobuk,' I says, managin' to return his grin, although my eyes wouldn't stay off that bulgin' load on his toboggan. 'By way of handier designation, though,' I says, 'folks call me Waseche Bill. I headed up here after gold. I got lost an' my grub run out, an' I'd give a pretty to be back on the Yukon spittin' on a stove.'

"Kobuk, he laughed, an' the next minute he was unharnessin' his dogs, an' in no time he had a meal of vittles cooked which was far an' away the best meal I ever et, or ever will. When it was finished Kobuk an' me smoked up, an' Kobuk he further orates, 'I run onto yer trail back yonder,' he says, 'an' I know'd you was a *chechako* 'cause you had a sled instead of a toboggan in this here soft snow country. An' I seen by the signs how you was about all in. So I swung in behind, knowin' I wouldn't have far to go. I passed over more than a week of your trail in four hours—that's the difference between knowin' how—an' not knowin.' You was a fool to head North. So was I four years ago—but I did. I come about as near cashin' in as you did. An Injun found *me.* But, I ain't afraid of the country now. I've learned

it—an' I hate it. I've got a camp up on the Kobuk, about a hundred miles from here, an' I'm takin' out considerable better than wages. Spite of you bein' a fool *chechako*, I like you. It's just such fools as you an' me that gits what they're after in the long run—pervided the snow an' the strong cold don't git us first. You're goin' along with me, an' we'll go pardners in my outfit on the Kobuk, an' if we stay with it, sometime we're goin' to make a strike.'

"He wouldn't have it no other way, an' so I throw'd in with Kobuk Jack, an' he was some man. We gouged the gravel together for a year, Kobuk always claimin' we'd strike it big—always hatin' the country, an' declarin' when he struck it he was a-goin' down to Montana an' buy him a cattle outfit an' live like a king where they have daylight the year around, an' twenty below zero was called a cold spell.

"When the year was out, I'd had enough of the Kobuk country. I couldn't see it like Kobuk Jack that there was a big strike ahead, so I pulled out an' drifted back to the Yukon camps an' fer a couple of years I worked fer wages, an' prospected, an' just about come out even.

"I was at Nulato when Kobuk came out with his stake. It wouldn't stack up big along with the Klondike or the Nome strikes. But she was big fer them days, couple hundred thousan' or so, an' Kobuk wanted me to go with him to Montana an' go into the cattle business. But I wouldn't an' then he wanted me to take a bunch of his dust, but I wouldn't do that, neither.

"A stampede started fer the Kobuk, but I didn't go—I'd had enough. After Kobuk had be'n gone a week, the storekeeper sends fer me one day an' hands me a buckskin sack that's heavy with dust. 'Kobuk Jack told me to give you this, fer a grub stake,' he says, 'An' he says he's gone fer good, an' you can't refuse it, 'cause he made me promise if you wouldn't take it, I'm to throw it in the river where no one kin find it.' I took it, bein' as it wasn't no use havin' it throw'd in the river, an' that's the last I ever seen or heerd of Kobuk Jack till a month ago, when all at once, he stepped through the door of the office, yonder. He'd aged some, but I know'd him the minute I clapped eyes on him, an' he was the same Kobuk as ever, rough talkin', but hearty an' pure gold clean through. I could see, though, he seemed kind of worried

about somethin' er other, so I called it a day an' shut up the office, an' we come on over here, an' Kobuk, he cooked dinner, same as he used to, an' after we done the dishes an' hung up the rag, we smoked up.

CHAPTER II

KOBUK JACK

" 'COME on out with it, Kobuk,' I says. 'What's on yer mind? They ain't no use beatin' about the bush between friends. How's the cattle business? An' what you doin' up here?'

" 'Well,' he says, 'fact is, Waseche,' he says, 'the cattle business is bigger than I bargained fer. It's got me. I'm broke, er will be. I figger that when they git through with me, I'll have about twenty thousan' less than nothin.' "

" 'What's the trouble?' I intrudes. 'Don't yer cows give no milk?'

" 'Milk!' he yells. 'Milk!' You dog-gone fool! I ain't runnin' no dairy! I'm runnin' a cow outfit —beef! Twenty thousan' head or so on the range!'

" 'Must be quite a chore around butcherin' time,' I admits, an' again he yells out at me. 'Butcherin' time! Why, you cussed ignoramous, we don't butcher 'em!'

"An' I kept a-goin' till it petered out, and I was lost"

"'Eat 'em alive?' I suggests.

" 'Ship 'em!' he roars. 'Ship 'em to Chicago. Load 'em on trains an' ship 'em!'

" 'Sounds easy,' I ventured. 'How-come you busted? You must git quite a stake off a trainload of cattle.'

" 'I do, but somehow, I ain't gittin' the calves I should. In other words, someone else is brandin' Round Seven calves, that's my brand. An' again, the sheep men are crowdin' me off the range, an' anyway I ain't no business man, an' my wife, she don't like the country no better than what I do, an' the kids is growin' up rough on account of so many cowpunchers fer playmates, an' take it first an' last, I'm sick of the cattle business. The wife wants to come back to Alaska—she was a nurse in the hospital at Nome when I was took down there with a frozen foot. Hadn't be'n fer her I'd be wearin' a wooden one now. When I made my strike I went up to St. Michaels on the way out an' we was married.'

" 'So there's a Missus Kobuk, an' some little Kobukses, is there?' I inquires. 'What do you want to do? Go back up on the Kobuk? Of course up there they wouldn't be no bad playmates fer the

kids, an' maybe Missus Kobuk would like it—she wouldn't have to mush more than a hundred miles fer to call on her neighbors, an' them Eskimo *Klooches* would be right proud to have her visit their igloos.'

" 'Go ahead, an' have yer fun out,' grins Kobuk, 'an' then we'll talk sense.'

" 'Unburden yerself,' I opines. 'I'm here to listen.'

" 'I was on the train comin' from Chicago this fall when I meets up with Moosehide Charlie, him headin' back fer the inside after a trip to the cities where he seen the sights to the extent of his pile. An' while Moosehide talked about the big country, I listened. He talked solid fer most two days, an' I got a pretty good history of the big country since I quit it, in the course of which he elaborates that you an' your pardner, which he was only a kid, but some sourdough, at that, had struck it big on Ten Bow. Accordin' to Moosehide, old Andy Morgan an' John D. Carnagie, an' P. J. Rockyfeller, couldn't scrape up an ante between 'em big enough to set in your game with. Well, you know Moosehide—he thinks in bigger figgers than what the facts justifies, an' always did, but at that, I

takes the trouble to look you up an' I finds out that Moosehide wasn't so far off as he generally is. So, I come up to see you.' Kobuk, he kind of hesitates, a little, an' then he goes on. 'The fact is, Waseche,' he says, 'you're my only chance. I wouldn't of come if I hadn't found out you was in shape so what I need wouldn't even make a hole in yer pile. What I want to know is will you loan me enough to break even? You'll get part of it back—you prob'ly never will get it all back 'cause I've got to hunt a job—an' a man with a job an' a family to support will be a long time payin' off twenty thousand dollars. But, if that cattle business was run right I know it would pay. I ain't the man to make it pay. I ain't got capital enough to buy up some sheep outfits, an' a lot of water rights an' to fight the rustlers with—if I had I would stay an' fight it out.'

"He stops an' waits fer me to speak. 'How much do you need?' I asks.

" 'I figure twenty thousan' would let me out even,' he says. 'It would pay my debts an' fix things so no one would lose any money on my account. I don't know exact—somewhere between eighteen an' twenty-five thousan'.'

" 'An' where would that leave you?' I asks. 'Where do you go from here?'

" 'Why,' he says, 'I can go to Chicago an' get a job.'

" 'What kind of a job?' I inquires, 'would you figure on holdin' down—in Chicago?'

" 'I ain't figured that far ahead,' says Kobuk. 'Any kind of a job that would make a livin' fer the wife an' kids. I'm a plumb failure in business fer myself, but I kin do as much work as I ever could.'

" 'Le's see if I've got the straight of it,' I says, 'Missus Kobuk wants to come back to Alaska, but you want to go to Chicago. You don't like the big country no more. You've got plumb citified till mountains an' rivers an' snow, an' dogs an' all that goes along with it don't interest you no more. You'd ruther live in a city in one of these here flat-top houses that all looks alike an' is inhabited by so many numerous folks that your neighbor that lives acrost the hall passes you on the street without knowin' he ever seen you before. An' on top of that you want a job like one of these here men that stands back of a counter in a store an' sells ribbons an' cloth by the yard to women, or

like the ones that wears white aprons an' stands behind them rows of shiny faucets, which it taxes their judgment to recommend a ten-year-old kid if he should take pineapple or strawberry juice in his sody water.'

"Kobuk, he was gittin' a little red around the gills, an' I know'd I'd kind of got to him. 'Look a here, Waseche,' he says, ' you know blame well I'd ruther be here in Alaska than anywheres else in the world, an' so would the wife—the country's got into my blood an' into her blood. We both thought when we went outside we never wanted to see it ag'in—but, shucks, we hadn't be'n away two years till we both would have give anything to be back, but we was in too deep to git out. An' now there ain't no chance to come back. If I was alone I'd come in a minute, but I ain't alone. I've got the wife and kids to think about an' to make a livin' for, an' a job is a job. Suppose we come North, what would we do? I couldn't leave 'em in some town or camp while I struck out in the hills an' made a strike. The time for strikes has gone, anyway, an' what would become of them while I was out punchin' holes in the gravel of creeks? Alaska ain't a poor man's country no

more, Waseche—an' I'm a poor man. But, that ain't neither here nor there. I come to you as one friend to another. I need the twenty thousan', an' need it bad. You've got it, an' with the capital you've got behind you, you kin git your money back—an' a lot more with it. I've told you the facts in the case. Now, do I git the twenty thousan', or don't I?'

" 'How much did you put into this here outfit to start out with?' I asks.

" 'A little better than a hundred thousan' an' give a mortgage for a hundred an' fifty fer the balance, an' I've paid about fifty thousan' of that.'

" 'An' how many of these here cows do you reckon you've got left?' 'Somewhere's around ten thousan' head,' he says.

" 'An' what do you claim the whole works is worth, as she lays?'

" 'Take 'em as they run, the goin' price is around twenty-five dollars a head, an' the ranch buildin's an' hay fields an' all the rest of it say twenty thousan'.'

"I figures fer a minute with a pencil, an' then I says, 'So she stands worth about $270,000.

Takin' off $100,000 fer the mortgage, she stands at somewheres around $170,000.'

" 'That's it,' agrees Kobuk. 'That's what she figures on paper—an' she's worth every cent of it to anyone that had another quarter of a million to dump into the outfit. They'd have a million dollar proposition, then. The way they've got me hemmed in by fair means an' foul, she's worth about twenty thousan' less than nothin'.'

"I figures a little more, an' Kobuk he gits restless. He gits up an' walks around an' his pipe goes out five or six times in as many minutes. Then he picks up his cap. 'Do I get the twenty thousan', or don't I?' he asks again.

" 'You don't,' says I. Well, sir, you should of seen Kobuk's face. He didn't say a word, jest stood there with his fingers grippin' his hat fer a long time. Then he turns to the door:

" 'Well, so long, Waseche,' he says, an' I noticed his voice sounded kind of hoarse like. 'I've got to be goin' back.'

" 'I'd be'n writin' out the check while he was standin' there, but he didn't notice. 'Hold on, Kobuk,' I says, as he pulls open the door, 'if this will help you out any, you're welcome to it.' I

held out the check an' he closed the door an' took the piece of paper in his hand. He stood lookin' at it fer a full minute like he don't know what it is.

" 'A hundred—an'—seventy—thousan'—dollars —' he says, slow like. 'What's this, Waseche?'

" 'Why, it's the pay fer yer cows,' I says. 'We're buyin' yer outfit, lock, stock an' barrel. You kin fix up the papers when you go back. An' that ain't all, Kobuk,' I says. 'If I done you right, I'd back you up ag'in that wall an' punch yer head fer you.'

" 'What do you mean?' he asks.

" 'I mean just what I said. I suppose you've fergot a *chechako* you found one time in the snow, eatin' dog in a Siwash camp way up in the Hog River country. You fergot that you took that *chechako* over onto the Kobuk an' give him a pardnership in a payin' claim. You fergot that you taught him more about minin' an' mushin' an' playin' a man's game than he know'd there was to learn. An' you fergot that a couple of years after—when you made yer strike, you found him in Nulato workin' fer wages, an' you left a poke of dust with the storekeeper with instructions to make the *chechako* take the dust. Them things you

fergot—but the *chechako didn't fergit.* But what makes me mad is this—years afterwards, when the tables is turned the other ways around, an' you're broke, an' the *chechako* has played into big luck, you come along an' ask him to *loan* you enough to *break even!* Yes sir, it makes me mad—*Break even!* So you can go to Chicago an' hunt you up a measly job amongst the stinks an' the noises of a city where the chances is yer kids would git killed by street cars or automobiles, or if they didn't they'd git hydrophoby er consumption fer want of a lungful of clean air! You tell me yer a failure because you couldn't make a go of raisin' cows. Well, it just happens that me an' my pardner is huntin' fer just such a failure as you be. I've worked with you up on the Kobuk. Listen here. You go back an' git the fambly an' head with 'em fer Fairbanks as quick as you kin git squared off. We've got a proposition to develop over on the Chena that's big. We ain't touched it yet, because we ain't found the right man to handle it. But, now we've found him. If it's a job you want, you've got one—an' she's a bigger job than you've ever tackled, at that. You kin live in Fairbanks where there's good schools fer the kids, an' good

society for the woman. An' that ain't all. What you don't use out of the check, you'd better put into the proposition. We'll organize the Chena Development Company, an' take it from me, yer money will more than double every couple of years.' "

Waseche paused and filled his pipe.

"What did he say?" asked Connie, who had been an eager listener.

"He didn't say nothin'," answered Waseche. "It ain't Kobuk's way. But next day I had to go to the doctor where he'd shook my hand. Oh, yes, they was one question he asked just before he went away. He says, 'But, what will yer pardner think of this deal? I see this here is a pardnership check.'

" 'Yes,' I says, 'an' that's the way she stands. I've tried onct or twict to shoulder the load alone when I'd made some outside investment that might not pay out—an' I ain't aimin' to try it no more.' "

Connie laughed. "You better not try it!" he exclaimed. "But this one is a dandy."

"What do you mean, son?"

"I mean that I wouldn't have missed it for the

world! I'm going to hit out for Montana and make it pay!"

"Sho', now, mebbe it would be better to jest let go an' git out with as little loss as we kin—an' charge it off to 'grub stake'."

"Not by a long shot we don't take a loss—not unless we have to! What do we care if we dump a few more thousand into it? We've got more than we can ever spend. And besides it wouldn't be playing the game. No, sir! Now we're into it, we'll go through with it—and if we lose, we will have had a run for our money, anyway."

"All right, son, go as far as you like—I'm for you," grinned Waseche. "But, at that, I never seen no kid before that was always just a-honin' fer a fight."

CHAPTER III

TWO DOT TOWNSEND

THE great trans-continental train that bore Connie Morgan eastward from Seattle to his destination in Montana ground to a protesting stop before the little station of Red Bank, and Connie stepped from the vestibule to a rubber-topped stool ostentatiously placed for him by the obsequious porter, and from the stool to the cinder platform. Up ahead he saw his big tarpaulin-covered bed roll, which served also as a trunk, tossed from the door of the baggage car. A blue-clad arm waved the "high-ball," the vestibule door slammed shut, and the heavy train moved smoothly along the rails, gaining momentum with every revolution of the wheels. The boy watched it for a moment, and turned to survey his immediate surroundings.

The town of Red Bank, Montana, may be surveyed from advantage from almost any point

within its precincts. Nestled close against the railroad in the broad valley of the Milk River, its single street, flanked on either side by wooden sidewalks, runs between two rows of story-and-a-half frame buildings whose square false fronts serve as an advertising medium for the emblazoning of the wares within. The street continued for perhaps two hundred yards parallel with the railway track and terminated abruptly in a broad flat whereon were located the shipping corrals, with their system of alleys and chutes and pens enclosed by board fences eight feet high and supported by posts a foot thick. The wooden stores, the shipping corrals, together with the station, the water tank, and the section house, the last three painted red, composed the entire commercial aspect of Red Bank. Of course, there were dwelling houses—not many, for most of the merchants of Red Bank were domiciled above their stores, and when the merchants were disposed of there were not many other residents of the little town to be housed. For Red Bank was a "cow town," a very busy, lively, and roistering town in the fall when the beef from thousands of square miles of range was being rounded up and loaded from its ship-

ping corrals, and at all other times a very quiet and unassuming little town, indeed.

A bronzed man with a grizzled beard who had been leaning against the little building in conversation with the station agent, stepped forward with a peculiar hitching gait. Connie's glance took in the details, of bowed legs, roll brimmed Stetson, and keen gray eyes.

"Was you lookin' for someone in particular?" the man asked.

"Why, yes," answered the boy. "I wired Bob Harmon, the foreman of the Round Seven Bar ranch, to meet me here."

"Gosh all fishhooks!" exclaimed the man. "Then you are the new owner of the Round Seven!"

"One of them," grinned the boy. "Were you expecting me? You aren't Bob Harmon, are you?"

"No, I ain't Bob. Townsend's my name—Charlie Townsend—Two Dot Townsend they call me on account of my brand, which I'm the owner of the Circle Two Dot outfit over on People's Creek, about thirty miles northeast of the Round Seven."

"Glad to know you," acknowledged Connie,

extending his hand. "My name's Morgan—Connie Morgan. But I wonder where Harmon is? Maybe he didn't get my wire."

"Yes, he got it all right," answered the other. "He was headin' for town yesterday afternoon an' got to my place jest as I was pullin' out myself. I had business here an' they wasn't no use putting two teams over the road, special when they're heavy as they are now with the snow meltin', so I told him if he'd stay there an' help the boys finish up the new horse corral, I'd fetch you out an' he could take you on from there. But I wasn't sort of expectin' no—that is, I figured, the new owner of the Round Seven would be an older man, somehow. Not that it ain't a fine thing," he hastened to add, "for a youngster to be goin' into business for himself, but, somehow the Round Seven—" The man did not finish the sentence, and Connie noted that his brow was slightly puckered.

"What's the matter with the Round Seven!" he asked.

"I wish I owned it," answered the man, evasively. "She'd ort to be a blame good outfit. But, we c'n talk while we drive. We better pull out soon as we get a bite to eat or we won't be

home in time fer supper—it'll crowd them cayuses the way it is, with the trail heavy in spots. I told them barn dogs to have the harness on agin the train pulled out."

Connie reached for his suit case, but Two Dot shook his head: "Leave yer war bag an' bed roll here an' we'll swing around an' pick 'em up," he advised, "an' then we'll hit the trail."

Together they made their way across a muddy, deep-rutted flat and gained the wooden sidewalk. As they passed along the street Connie took in the details of the little cow town; four or five general stores, a bank, two pool rooms, a barber shop, a harness and saddle store, a wide-doored building whose sign proclaimed "LIVERY, BOARDING, AND FEED," two restaurants, a hotel, and a miscellaneous assortment of buildings of lesser importance. Past the hotel Two Dot led, and turned in a couple of doors farther on where the sign read "HOP WING, RESTAURANT & LAUNDRY."

The two hung their hats upon pegs provided for the purpose, and washed their hands at a little built-in sink in a rear corner of the room. Then they seated themselves at a small wooden table

As they passed along the street Connie took in the details of the little Cow Town

as the proprietor shuffled noiselessly in. "Mo'nin', Missa Two Dot, what you goin' eat?"

"Hello, Hop! Beefsteak, an' I want it rar', an' fried spuds——"

"Dinna no leady yet—on'y sho't o'da, now."

"Fry up a half dozen aigs an' a slab of ham, then, an' a cup of coffee, an' a couple of pieces of pie, an' hurry up about it. What's yourn?" The last to Connie.

"The same," answered the boy, and the Chinaman shuffled into the kitchen at the rear from whence presently came a great sizzling and the odor of frying ham.

"I always eat to the Chinee's place," explained Two Dot. "It's cleaner than what the hotel is, though the women claims he squirts water out of his mouth to wet down the clothes when he's ironin' 'em. But I don't wear no b'iled shirts myself, so let him squirt all he wants to, jest so he keeps it out of the vittles."

Connie was about to reopen the question of the Round Seven, when the Chinaman appeared bearing two plates heaped high with ham and eggs. Two cups of steaming coffee followed, and then two plates containing two pieces of pie each. Two

Dot glanced at the pie, and swallowing a huge mouthful of fried egg, he pointed to the plate in disgust:

"Since when you begun to cut a pie five ways?" he asked. "I didn't order no shavin' of pie. What I want is two *pieces!* The way to cut a pie is straight acrost the middle both ways. You c'n lay off yer pie with a pair of dividers fer short-horns an' pilgrims if you want to, but me—I want two four-piece cuts—sabe?"

The Chink smiled broadly. "Alle light, Missa Two Dot. Loo ol' customa. Loo alle light." He removed the offending pieces and returned a moment later with the plates upon each of which reposed the half of a pie.

From the restaurant, the two picked their way through the mud to the feeding stable across the street, and a moment later the hostlers were hooking up a team of rangy sorrels to a light spring wagon. Two Dot climbed in and gathered up the reins, and Connie seated himself beside him. The horses, fresh from a long night's rest, danced and chafed at the bit, as the wagon rolled down the wooden apron that led to the street. It was but the work of a moment for the boy to swing the suit

case and bed roll into the back of the vehicle, and with a word from Two Dot to the team they were off. The wheels sank to the hubs in the mud as they traversed the length of the street. It was not quite so bad as they emerged onto the flats in front of the shipping corrals, for there Two Dot swung them from the trail and pulled out onto the sodden grass. Here the trail itself was almost obliterated, for every one else who had traveled the road since spring had set in had done the same thing, with the result that the flat had all the appearance of a plowed field. All tracks narrowed into the trail again at the farther side of the flat, and for a mile or more, until the red iron bridge that spanned Milk River was crossed, the boy found himself holding on for dear life as the wheels would drop suddenly into a bottomless chuck hole and emerge dropping huge chunks of gray alkali mud from spokes and felloes. A short distance beyond the river the trail slanted upward to the bench whose rims formed a skyline three or four hundred feet higher than the floor of the valley. The trail followed the windings of a deep coulee, dry normally, but now a rushing torrent of snow water, through which the horses floundered once or twice

to their bellies. The bench gained, the trail became almost dry, and the sorrels struck into a brisk trot that sent volleys of mud from the whirling wheels.

"She'll be good goin' now, till we hit the mountains," opined Two Dot, "an' then we won't have no mud to speak of, only soggy snow, but we'll waller through all right. How do you like the looks of the country?"

Connie's eyes swept the level bench which terminated nearly fifty miles away in three small ranges of mountains. Except on the mountain slopes only an occasional patch of snow was visible, and the bench stretched away brown and bare and ugly.

"Where are the ranches? And where are the cattle?" inquired the boy. "Isn't this cattle range? And Kobuk said the nesters were building cabins and fencing all the creeks."

"They ain't many cattle between the Bear Paws an' Milk River," explained Two Dot. "They're mostly sheep, an' this here is summer range. They winter 'em in the mountains. There's ranches enough, though. You can't see 'em because they are all down in the coulees. Everything's built in

the coulees an' crick bottoms in this country, for to get shelter from the wind, an' to git the hay land under ditches. Nothin' grows here except prickly pears, an' sage, an' buffalo grass without irrigation. Between here an' the mountains, as wide as you c'n see, you're lookin' right over the top of prob'ly fifty ranches. Them mountains to the left is the Little Rockies, the ones straight in front, south, is the Bear Paws, an' them further ones to the right is the Highwoods. My outfit lays straight ahead acrost two divides, on People's Crick, an' yourn lies thirty miles further on an' a little to the right, on Eagle Crick. You're acrost two or three more divides beyond me—the South Slope of the Bear Paws, an' Eagle Crick empties into the Mizoo, that's what they call the Missouri River, fer short, an' People's Crick flows northeast through the Gros Ventre Reservation [Note: Pronounced Grow Vaun] an' then swings north an' empties into Milk River. That'll kind of give you the lay of the land. North of the Bear Paws it's mostly sheep, an' south an' east of 'em it's mostly cattle an' horses, though the sheep's beginnin' to crowd in along the South Slope."

Two Dot ceased speaking, and for some time

the horses jogged over the trail to the accompaniment of the rattle of the wagon wheels. Connie had liked the man from the first, but more than that, he felt instinctively that if he would he could tell him a whole lot about the cattle business in general, and about the Round Seven Bar in particular. He wanted to question him, but didn't know how to begin. Townsend himself furnished the opening. "I suppose yer pa's pretty well fixed fer to set you up in business with an outfit like the Round Seven," he ventured. "It must of set him back quite a figger."

"I haven't any father," the boy replied. "He died several years ago in Alaska, and he died poor. My partner and I bought this ranch to help Kobuk Jack out. The ranch broke Kobuk, and a long time ago he helped Waseche Bill out. Waseche's my partner, and the best dog-goned man that walks on two legs, so it was up to us to see him through."

"Who's this here Kobuk Jack?" asked Townsend.

"Why, he's the man that owned the ranch. We bought him out."

"Oh, Wilson—Jack Wilson's the name we knew

him by. It's too bad he couldn't make a go of it. Everyone liked him, but he wasn't no cow man. He was all fer prospectin'. He'd start out an' nick away at the hills, an' make long trips into the bad lands huntin' gold, an' left Harmon to run the outfit."

"Isn't Harmon a good cow man?" asked the boy.

"You bet he is," assented the other, quickly. "A blame good cow man. An' he's smart, too. But it don't make no difference how good a cow man anyone is, I don't want no one but me runnin' my own outfit. I ain't sayin' nothin', mind you, agin' Harmon. Only personal, I don't want no foreman whatever that owns a brand of his own."

"You mean he would be thinking about his outfit and wouldn't give time enough to yours?"

"Um-hum, either that, or he'd be thinkin' about his own outfit an' give too blame much time to mine," Two Dot answered, dryly. Connie wondered what the man meant, but refrained from questioning him further.

"I'm goin' to find out what's the matter with the outfit, and put it on a paying basis," observed the boy.

Two Dot surveyed him quizzically. "Time you get through with it I judge you'll find you set yerself quite a chore. But the Round Seven ort to be payin', at that—an' payin' big."

"You call it the 'Round Seven'," said Connie, "and Kobuk called it the 'Round Seven Bar.' "

"That's the brand—Round Seven Bar, left side—goes like this:" With the butt of his whip, Two Dot produced a running-iron facsimile of the brand on the muddy dashboard. "Around here we leave off the 'Bar' in speakin' of it, to save time, same as my outfit is called the Two Dot, instead of the Circle Two Dot."

"Kobuk said the sheep men were crowding in on him, and that the rustlers were stealing a lot of his calves," ventured the boy.

"Yup," answered Townsend. "I heard the Round Seven wasn't puttin' their irons on as many calves as they'd ort. An' there is considerable nesters along the cricks close around the outfit. Them's some of the things you've got on yer hands to figger about." After a moment of silence he observed, "Course it ain't none of my business, an' speakin' generally, I ain't no hand to horn in on other folks's, but you must of struck it pretty

lucky up there in Alaska to of made enough money to buy up the Round Seven."

Connie smiled. "Yes, we did strike it lucky. My partner is a wonderful mining man, and he runs the outfit. It was fun when we were getting started, when we didn't know whether or not we were going to make a go of it, and all the odds were against us, but after things came our way and she got to running smoothly, I got tired of it. So Waseche stays in Ten Bow and runs things while I'm mostly chasing off on side issues, like this cattle business. I'd never make an office miner. I like action."

"Well, by the Belled Buzzard of Bejax!" snorted Two Dot, "you're goin' to find out you've bought into action enough, time you've got the Round Seven back to where she belongs! Yer in a rough strip of country over there on the South Slope; what with the mountains on one side, an' Bad Lands on the other, she's rough, in more ways than one. If you keep yer eyes open an' yer mouth shet, an' yer six-gun handy, you might put it over. But, it's a man's job, an' it's goin' to be interestin' to see what you do with it."

CHAPTER IV

BOB HARMON

Mile after mile the horses trotted along the trail that stretched interminably across the bench with its monotony of dry buffalo grass. Conversation lagged, and resumed. The mountains loomed ever nearer, until the trail slanted sharply upward in the ascent of Tiger Ridge, the long high spur that is the northernmost reach of the Bear Paws. An hour's brisk travel along the wind-blown crest of the ridge, and they were in the mountains proper, the horses floundering and plunging through sodden drifts or trotting briskly over the wind-swept stretches. The sun set as they crossed the Snake Creek divide. They were beyond the stage trail, now, and the going was much heavier.

The last seven miles took an hour and a half to accomplish, and darkness had set in when the horses turned wearily into a long barbed wire lane

that led to a dark clump of lodgepole pine on a little plateau of the People's Creek valley. Lights glowed dully from among the pines, and Two Dot pulled up with a loud "Whoa!" before a low ranch house of logs. The door of the bunk house beyond the main house opened, and a ranch hand hurried to take the horses, as Two Dot jumped lightly to the ground and led the way into the house.

"Well, for land sakes!" greeted "Ma" Townsend when introductions were over. "An' you expect to run the Round Seven, an' you jest a boy?"

Connie laughed. "That's what I came down here for, and it's up to me to make good."

"Well, good luck to you. But, I wouldn't want to send a boy of mine over among them—" she halted abruptly at a glance from her husband, and continued, lamely, "among them bad lands an' snow drifts. But set down to the table. Supper's all ready, an' I expect you're ready for it. Bob Harmon jest come from the bunk house, but I told him to go back there till after you'd et. There'll be plenty of time to talk to Bob, after, an' I told him you wouldn't be pullin' out for the Round Seven to-night, nohow. Plenty of time

in the mornin', an' with them half-broke broncs he's got, you'll travel better by daylight. An' you won't have to unroll your bed, because we're always ready fer a stopper or two. It's quite a ways between ranches an' folks can't always get to where they're goin' agin' night comes."

Supper over, Mrs. Townsend busied herself in the kitchen and Connie and Two Dot drew up to the stove. There was a noisy stamping of feet upon the little porch, the door opened, and a pudgy, round-faced man of perhaps thirty, stepped into the room, jerking the Stetson from his head as he closed the door behind him.

"This here's Bob Harmon," introduced Two Dot. "Bob, let me make you acquainted with yer new boss."

The man stared for a second in astonishment, and stepping forward, he extended a soft, damp palm. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Morgan," he greeted, with a broad smile. "I got yer telegram all right, but I suppose Two Dot, here, told you how we figgered it wasn't no use puttin' two teams over the trail. I suppose it's all right!"

The boy noted that the speaker was eyeing him keenly. He nodded. "Of course it's all right.

And, there's another little matter that we might as well get right while we're about it. Up where I come from we don't call people 'Mister.' Connie Morgan is my name, and you can use either one, or both—but, not 'Mister Morgan,' please."

Harmon grinned. "I might of know'd that, too. Wilson told me when he come back fer his stuff an' his family, that he'd sold out to an Alasky party—come near goin' up there myself, me an' another feller, time of the big rush—but, seemed like Wilson said this party's name is Bill somethin'."

"Waseche Bill," supplied Connie. "He's my partner."

"That was the name, an' accordin' to Wilson's tell this here Bill whirls a big loop up where he lives. He did mention somethin' about a pardner, too—but I kind of wasn't lookin' fer no—that is, I mean not no man quite as young as what you look to be. Not that you ain't old enough, at that," he hastened to add, " 'cause I've saw kids 'fore now that made good cow hands 'fore their voice changed. But, somehow, from what he told me about this here Bill party I kind of looked fer him an' his pardner to be sort of old fellers."

"Well, not so old but what we're still able to get around," grinned Connie, and Two Dot joined in the laugh that followed.

"Shall I hook up the team?" asked Harmon, "or, was you figurin' on beddin' down here?"

"We'll stay here to-night and pull out in the morning," answered the boy, and a few minutes later Harmon withdrew to the bunk house.

"You look sleepy," suggested Two Dot, after an hour of desultory conversation. "I guess you're like me, I never could git a night's sleep on one of them sleepin' cars."

"I haven't slept much for the last two or three nights," agreed the boy. "I can't sleep on the train, either, and the last night out the boat rocked and pitched so in a storm that I could hardly stick in my berth. I guess I will turn in."

Two Dot showed him to his room, and a few minutes later as the boy snuggled between warm blankets, he wondered whether he had only imagined it, or had a swift gleam of satisfaction followed the look of surprise in Bob Harmon's eyes at the moment of their introduction? Connie did not know. He did know, however, that there was

something decidedly wrong with the Round Seven, and that it was up to him to straighten things out. Also, he fully realized that in all probability it was going to be a tough job, and he remembered the words of Big Dan McKeever, of the Mounted: "The reputation of bein' a fool don't hurt a man none, in fact, it's the biggest asset he's got—provided he ain't one." With a smile, the boy turned over, and in two minutes was sound asleep.

The drive to the Round Seven ranch next morning was uneventful enough. The trail held insofar as possible to the wind-swept ridges which the half broken team of strawberry roans covered for the most part at a run, that was only checked by the deep drifts through which they plunged in crossing the snow-choked coulees to gain another wind-swept ridge. As they topped the divide that gave onto the South Slope, Connie gazed out over a broad plain cut and scarred by deep gulches and coulees whose perpendicular sides showed black and ugly in contrast to the great patches of drifted snow. Far to the southward a range of mountains showed, their summits rearing white and clean-cut against the grey of the clouded sky.

"The bad lands," vouchsafed Harmon, indicat-

ing the plain, "an' them is the Judith Mountains over acrost the Mizoo."

"Why do they call 'em bad lands?" asked the boy.

" 'Cause that's what they be. Nothin' but rock, an' mud cracks, an' pizen springs, an' rattlesnakes, an' outlaws."

"Don't the cattle go in there?"

"Naw, nothin' but horses. They ain't only about six or seven waterholes that's fit to drink out of, an' most of them runs dry along to'ard the heel of the summer. Horses can pick up a livin' on the scatterin' of bunch grass, an' they kin travel a long ways to water. They ain't enough feed to run cattle in there, an' if they was they wouldn't be enough water. The cow stock uses along the aidge of the mountains, an' on the flats between the Bear Paws an' the Little Rockies, an' west over onto Big an' Little Sandy."

At the foot of the long descent from the divide the trail swerved abruptly to the westward and wound in and out among the foothills, crossing the heads of innumerable coulees until at last it swung into the broader valley of Eagle Creek, which it crossed and recrossed as it threaded its way through

groves of cottonwoods and willows. Emerging suddenly from a thicket of cottonwood, Harmon swung the team up a steep bank, and Connie found himself in the dooryard of the Round Seven. "Here we be!" exclaimed Harmon, as he pulled the team to a stand, and filling his lungs, sent forth a yell that rang far down the valley: "Y-e-e-o-ow! Come an' git 'em, or I'll turn 'em loose!"

CHAPTER V

AT THE ROUND SEVEN

In answer to the call, the door at the rear of the low log house was thrown open and half a dozen cow punchers, some in chaps and others with their overalls shoved into the tops of high-heeled boots, swarmed out. All were bare headed and coatless, and Connie was conscious of the swift, appraising glance of each pair of eyes as they swarmed about the horses. Before the boy could alight the team was unhitched and on its way to the barn in care of two of the boys, while the rest waited in awkward expectancy.

"Boys, this here is the new boss," introduced Harmon, "name's Morgan, an' you ain't to lift it by the handle. Looks like a kid, an' new to the cow country, but I mistrust he ain't no pilgrim, at that." Connie smiled broadly as he jumped to the ground, and the boys grinned sheepishly. Harmon went on with the introductions. "That

hombre closest to you is Tex Rutledge, him havin' be'n run off his native heath, as the feller says, he hits for Montana. The next one to him is Kid Owens, another one which the State of Texas got to little fer to hold him. The old one is Alex McLaurie, that kin tell a cow from a horse seven days in the week incloodin' Sundays. Mac, he's an old timer, havin' be'n found down on the Yallerstone herdin' horses way back in eighteen-forty when Lewis an' Clarke discovered the country. An' the last one is Milk River Bill. Bill an' Tex is the top broncho twisters of the outfit. They was both rocked in the saddle of a rough string when they was babies, an' they ain't neither one of 'em ever reached down fer a handful of leather sence."

The four advanced, still grinning, and four hands were diffidently thrust out. Connie grasped each hand in turn.

"Glad to know yuh," said Tex.

"Glad to know yuh," muttered Kid Owens.

"Glad to know yuh," repeated McLaurie.

"Glad to know yuh," echoed Milk River Bill.

Connie smiled: "We'll know each other a lot better before long, I hope," he said.

"Go on in an finish yer dinner, an' tell the cook we're here," advised Harmon, and turned to Connie: "While he's settin' on ourn I'll show you the house. Not that they's such a lot of it, but you might's well see what they is."

The two men who had taken the horses were returning from the barn and Harmon paused: "Might's well make a job of it an' git acquainted all to onct." He waited till the two came up:

"This here's the new owner," he explained, "name's Morgan, without no Mister onto it." The two paused and Harmon pointed to a lanky man with a long, sallow face: "I'll make you acquainted with Tombstone, so called on account he's plumb doleful minded an' full of forbodin'. Other name's Traxel, but it ain't of no importance.

"Glad to know yuh," uttered Tombstone, eyeing the boy sombrely.

"The other one," continued Harmon, is Canary Struthers, so referred to on account it's his habit to bust out into yodlin' without no more excuse than what a bronc needs to pitch."

"Glad to know yuh," quoth Canary, and when the handshaking was over, the two disappeared through the door.

Harmon led the way to the front of the house and up the two steps to a small porch from which a snow drift, that had evidently lain deep all winter, had recently been shovelled. The door opened directly into a large, square room whose walls were adorned with calendars of other years brightly lithographed and blazonly flaunting the names of mercantile companies, banks, and Chicago commission houses. The calendars, three or four chairs, the stove, and a single table constituted the entire furnishing of the room.

Opening a door, the foreman disclosed a smaller room in which was a bed and a dresser. "Wilsons slep' in there, an' et in here," he explained. "The next room to this is where the kids slep', an' they's a couple of rooms beyond that's handy fer to put up stoppers. They's a lot of junk in the kids' room that Wilson left here, saddles, bridles, chaps, an' the like. I expect you can pick you out an outfit amongst it, except boots—hisn wouldn't never fit you."

"Yes, Kobuk told me about the boots. I got a pair in Seattle."

Another door opened and a man entered, his arms bare to the elbows. A white flour sack

depending from a string tied about his middle served for an apron, and in his hands he carried a plate, a cup and saucer, a knife, a fork, and a spoon. Pulling the table out from the wall, he proceeded to set the dishes upon it, and was about to disappear through the door, when Harmon called to him: "Hey, Walt, this here's the new boss. Morgan's his name, an' he's signified that it's bad medicine to say Mister." He turned to Connie:

"That's Walt Jones, the cook. He's cooked on cow outfits from Mexico to the line, an' when it comes to dishin' up a good feed of vittles, he's got 'em all skinned."

"Glad to know yuh," opined the cook, impersonally, and wiping his hand upon his apron, took the boy's extended hand in a firm grip.

"What's the idea of the lone place at the table?" asked Connie.

"That's yourn. Wilsons et in here."

"Where do the rest of you eat?"

"The men's grub house is back, jest off the kitchen."

"Are you full up out there? Isn't there room for one more?"

The cook grinned: "Room for twenty-two to set down to onct," he replied, "an' they wasn't only eight of us till you come."

"Well just fix me up a place out there, then," said the boy, "and we'll all eat together."

Jones nodded, and picking up the dishes, stepped through the door, closing it behind him.

"Boss goin' to fodder along of the rest of us," he announced, to the boys who had resumed their interrupted meal. "Bob, he'll lose out on the head of the table. Shove down there one space, an' I'll put him next to the boss."

"Ain't stuck up none," commented Tex, in a voice of approval.

"Huh," sneered Milk River Bill, "prob'ly one of these here *hombres* that's afraid someone'll say somethin' he don't hear. Reason why he's feedin' in here is so he can catch him an earful."

Tex grinned an irritating grin: "What you got to talk about that ain't fit fer the boss to hear? Me—he's welcome to listen to all the gems of thought that trickles off my chin."

"They ain't nothin' never trickled off'n it yet that was worth listenin' to," retorted Milk River. "Personal, I'd ruther the coffee coolers stayed

on their own side of the fence, an' left us on ourn."

"Yeh," drawled Tex, "but the coffee coolers is the ones that makes the rules, so what you think about it don't carry no heft, one way or another."

The cook's head was thrust in from the kitchen: "Cut out that rowin' in there, 'fore I rattle yer skulls together! If youse two wants to go to war, go outside." The two thus admonished lapsed into silence, for the cook was an autocrat whose authority was unquestioned within his own domain, and one glance at the huge forearms was generally sufficient to give color to that authority.

Connie and the foreman entered and took their places and the meal was finished in silence, the boys pushing back from the table and leaving the room as soon as their plates were empty.

CHAPTER VI

LEARNING THE ROPES

"WHAT'S doing on the ranch this time of year?" asked the boy, when the last of the hands had departed.

"Nothin', to speak of, right now," answered Harmon. "We run in a wild bunch about a week ago an' Tex an' Milk River are breakin' about a dozen head for the remuda. Kid Owens an' McLaurie are ridin' the range throwin' weak stuff into the hospital bunch, an' Tombstone an' Canary are pitchin' hay to 'em. Tombstone an' Canary ain't riders, they're ranch hands.'

Connie laughed: "I suppose it will all be perfectly clear to me in a day or two, but the fact is I don't know much more than I did before you told me. What is a 'wild bunch' and how do you 'run them in', and what is a 'remuda?' "

"Why, a wild bunch is a bunch of horses that's runnin' the range an' ain't be'n broke yet—mares,

an' young saddle stock. We run a bunch of 'em into the corral an' cut out the three-year-olds an' turn the rest loose. Then we go ahead an' break 'em. The remuda is the outfit of saddle horses we carry along on the round-up. We use about a dozen riders on the round-up, an' each one has from eight to a dozen horses in his string. Some horses gets old, an' some gets stove up every year, so we have to break new ones every spring to take their place."

"That's a lot of horses," exclaimed the boy. "The barn don't look big enough to hold them."

Harmon laughed: "They ain't nothin' kep' in the barn but a few work horses, an' a drivin' team, an' three or four winter horses apiece. The rest of 'em's out on the range. We'll start the horse round-up mebbe to-morrow an' run 'em into the big field an' hay 'em till it's time for the calf round-up. We aim to pull the wagons about the tenth of May, soon as the new grass gets strong enough to keep the horses goin'."

"What do you mean by pulling the wagons? You see, I'm green as anyone can be."

"The wagons is the round-up. There's the cook wagon, an' the bed wagon, an' wherever they set

up, there's where the round-up camps. You'll get onto it all pretty quick. I s'pose I'd be the same way if I was to horn into a gold camp up in Alasky. They's tricks in all trades, as the feller says, but onct you get onto 'em they're easy as slidin' off a haystack.

"D'you ever ride any!" asked Harmon, as he pushed back his chair, and fumbled in his pocket for a toothpick.

"Never was on a horse in my life,"[1] answered the boy, "but I can learn."

"Sure, you can learn, an' if you'd like to tackle it this afternoon we can kind of look the place over. I want to ride through the hospital bunch anyhow an' see how they're comin'."

"I can't learn any younger," smiled the boy. "I'd like to go. My boots are in my bed-roll, I'll step out and get them."

"They're in yer room," interrupted the cook. "I had Canary carry yer stuff in."

"While you're gettin' 'em on, I'll rustle you an outfit out of that bunch of junk in the other room," said Harmon, and when Connie, teetering un-

[1] In the northern division of the Mounted in which Connie served there are no horses—only dogs.

steadily in his new high heeled boots stepped from his room he found Harmon in the living room engaged in coiling a rope which he fastened by a strap to the right side of a big stock saddle. Picking up a pair of black angora chaparajos, he handed them to Connie, "Get into these chaps an' here's your spurs."

The boy drew on the chaps, fastened the buckles of his spurs, and followed Harmon who had picked up the saddle, hung a bridle on the horn, and with a blanket in his other hand led the way to the stable. As Connie walked along behind he realized the reason for the peculiar, shuffling gait he had noticed in the men of the cow country. It was the high heeled boots that threw them far out of balance. "I sure would hate to trail very far in these boots," said the boy as Harmon threw open the stable door.

The foreman laughed: "They ain't meant fer walkin'. A cow hand don't do no walkin' that he kin git out of. It's plumb redic'lus sometimes. Why, I've saw a cow puncher chase a cayuse half a mile around a field a-foot an' ketch him up an' saddle him just to ride forty rod to where he was goin'."

"But wouldn't it be just as easy to wear something on your feet that you could walk in, too?"

" 'Twouldn't be safe," explained Harmon. "You see, if it wasn't fer them high heels, if yer horse got to ra'rin', an' pitchin', yer foot might slip on through yer stirrup, an' then if you got throw'd, er yer horse went down with you, you'd be hung up an' drug to death, less'n you was quick enough, an' lucky enough to draw yer gun an' kill him first. Them high heels stickin' down like they do ketches on the stirrup an' holds yer foot from slippin' through, an' then agin, they're handy if yer rope-handlin' stock. You kin sink them heels into the ground an' hold 'em, instead of bein' drug all around the corral."

"The more a fellow knocks around," replied the boy "the sooner he learns that there's generally a good reason for doing things the way they are done in different parts of the country. And the quicker he learns to do them that way the easier he gets along."

"I expect that's right," admitted Harmon "I ain't never be'n around none to speak of outside of the cow country. Be'n to Chicago quite a lot with beef, but I didn't learn nothin' of no account,

except that it's Gosh Almighty lonesome, an' a long ways back to the open range." Harmon led the way into the barn where a long row of horses stood munching hay in their stalls. "These is the winter saddle horses," he explained. "The work horses an' drivin' team is in that other alley. The rest of the horses is out on the range. We keep four apiece of our top horses up an' grain 'em in winter. They's quite a lot of winter ridin', what with ridin' fences, an' throwin' stock onto water, an' keepin' 'em from pilin' up agin' the fences in a blizzard, an' throwin' the weak stuff in on hay." He paused behind a coal black horse, and blanket in hand, entered the stall. "Whoa, Nigger!" he soothed, as the horse, stepped about restlessly. Connie watched with interest as the man, talking all the time, and avoiding any quick motions placed the blanket upon the horse's back and smoothed it into place.

"You've got to take it easy with these here cayuses," he explained. "Nigger, here, he's plumb gentle, an' so is most all of these winter horses, but they git excited easy unless they're handled right." Picking up the saddle he threw a stirrup and the cinch back over the seat, swung it to the

horse's back, and fitting it upon the blanket, pushed the seat clear, and reaching beneath the horse's belly caught the cinch ring and drew it into place, explaining to the boy the use of the patent buckle that has superceded the old fashioned four-in-hand cinch knot which passed into the discards along with the double rig saddle.

After bridling the horse, the foreman backed him out of the stall and led him out the door where he dropped the reins and entering the barn, re-appeared a moment later with a bay horse which he led by the halter to a point near the corral fence where his own outfit lay.

"Won't Nigger get away?" asked Connie, as the man proceeded to saddle his own mount.

"No, they're broke to stand when the reins is dropped. 'Tyin' 'em to the ground,' we call it, an' they'll stand that way when they'd bust a pair of reins if they was tied to a fence or post." Placing his knee against the bay horse's side, the man pulled on the latigo strap with all his might: "Quit that, you old son-of-a-gun!" he cried, and a moment later turned to Connie with a grin: "You got to watch out fer that trick," he warned, "about half the cayuses git wise to it. They swell

up on you when yer cinchin' 'em, then when you git on yer cinch is loose, an' yer blanket works back, an' first thing you know you've got a galded horse. It's loose-cinches, not tight ones that hurts horses, an' men, too. 'Cause sometimes it's loose enough so the saddle turns." The man led his horse over beside the black. "These horses is gentle so you could climb up onto 'em anyway," he said, "but they's plenty of 'em in the remuda that ain't, so you might's well learn how to git on an' off. Watch me." The man swung lightly into the saddle and back to the ground. "See how it works. It's the easiest way with gentle horses—an' the only way with bad ones. Always go to a horse's head an' git on from in front, and always on the left side. Take yer bridle reins in yer left hand, an' ketch 'em up short agin the horse's mane. With a real bad horse you grab the cheek strap along with the reins to keep him from rar'in away from you. Turn yer stirrup around with yer right hand an' stick yer left foot in it. Grab the horn with yer right hand, an' swing on. When you git a little practice, the worse a horse jerks back, an' rar's, the quicker he lands you in the saddle. Gittin' off, you swing right back the way you got on.

Connie found himself holding on for dear life as the wheels would drop suddenly into a bottomless chuck hole and emerge, dropping huge chunks of gray Alkali mud

Don't never try to git on or off on the right hand side. The horses ain't broke for it, an' you might git hurt." Connie followed the directions and was surprised with the ease with which he swung into the saddle. Harmon nodded approval, and mounting, led the way down the creek. "You'll soon git on to the ridin' part," he said. "The main thing is to save yer horse all you kin. Ride on yer stirrups, an' you won't pound his back to pieces. An' ride with a loose rein, onless you've got a pitchin' horse. Then you got to keep him from sinkin' his head.

"These is the hay fields," explained the foreman, as he fastened a wire gate behind him, "they's four of 'em on the crick under ditches that's in alfalfa, an' then we cut wild hay in the coulees. We aim to put up around five or six hundred ton a year, that winters the work horses an' the winter saddle stock an' feeds the hospital stuff. This here is what we call the 'big pasture.' That's where we run the weak stuff in to feed 'em. There's the boys now pitchin' hay to 'em." They rode up to where Canary and Tombstone were pitching hay from a wagon that was kept constantly in motion so that the cattle feeding behind the wagon were strung out in a long line. "Feed

'em that way so they clean it all up," explained the foreman. "If yer throw'd it in piles they'd git to crowdin', an' tromp a lot of it into the ground, an' the weak ones wouldn't git none. This is what we call the hospital bunch, old cows, an' some yearlin's that didn't winter through good on the range, an' some cows that's near to the calvin'. We generally got three or four hundred head in here along to'ards spring. The boys ride the range an' throws in the weak stuff, an' rides the pasture an' throws out them that's picked up on the hay. We'll swing out the west gate here an' up onto the bench. We kin pull over onto the shoulder of that there butte an' git a good look over the country. I kin show you from there just what yer up against. I s'pose you know that the Round Seven is a losin' game?"

"Yes," answered Connie, as the horses travelled side by side up a coulee that led to the bench. "That's what I came down here for—to find out what's the matter. Kobuk Jack said it ought to pay, and pay big."

"Who?"

"Why, Kobuk Jack—Jack Wilson, you called him down here—the man we bought out."

"Oh, he did, eh? Well, *he* didn't make it pay!" The man was looking straight ahead, and glancing sidewise. Connie saw that his eyes had narrowed in evident anger. The next moment, however he was smiling as he turned toward the boy. "This Wilson, he didn't savvy the cattle business. But, at that, he's right about the outfit ort to pay. Only it's goin' to cost an all-fired lot of money to make it pay."

"What's the matter with it?"

"Well, they's quite a lot the matter. First off, there's the nesters that's come in an' fenced off the water. Birch Crick an' Eagle, below the Round Seven, an' Beaver is gittin' pretty well fenced. These here nesters would all have to be bought out, an' they're all holdin' high. Then, we generally finish off our beef stuff on the Injun Reservation, an' the Injuns kills a lot of 'em."

"Don't the Round Seven pay for pasturing on the Reservation?"

"Sure. Fifty cents a head."

"Why don't you collect damages, then, for the cattle the Indians kill?"

"You can't collect no damages agin' the Government," answered Harmon.

"You can't, eh?" answered the boy, "guess I'll just look over that contract this evening."

Harmon squirmed uneasily in his saddle: "We never had no contract wrote out," he said. "We jest paid over the money an' turned in the beef."

"Who did you pay it to?"

"Major Hogan, the Injun Agent."

"Did you get a receipt?"

"No. They ain't no use of a receipt. Hogan, he ain't a-goin' to claim we didn't pay him. An' that's all there is to it."

"How about the calves?" asked the boy, changing the subject abruptly. "I understand the Round Seven isn't branding the number of calves it ought to."

"Who says so?" asked Harmon, his eyes once more narrowing.

"Kobuk Jack did."

"Look a-here, boss. I told you Wilson didn't know nothin' about cattle. If he says we ain't brandin' enough calves he's off. He didn't pay no attention to the ranch, nohow. He'd ruther be off in the bad lands peckin' away at the rocks than stick around the outfit. I done all the runnin' of the ranch, an' I know the cow business, an' I'm

A moment later the muzzles of four rifles were thrust through four apertures in the sagebrush that was loosely woven between the wires of the fence

. . . Then froze in his tracks as he found himself staring into the muzzle of the boy's service revolver

tellin' you we brand all the calves that we git, except mebbe a few that the sage brushers git."

"Who are the sage brushers?"

"Oh, a few rustlers that slips around through the sage brush an' dobs their rope on a calf now an' then. They git away with some stuff, all right, but you can't ketch 'em at it. They're pretty slick when it comes to calf stealin'."

They had reached the high elevation that gave a view of Eagle Creek and its feeders for miles. Harmon pointed out half a dozen small outfits: "There's what's on Eagle," he said, "part cattle, an' part sheep. An' there's more on the other cricks. Do you think you've got the money to buy 'em out?"

The boy thought that he detected just a note of eagerness in the man's words, and that the eyes that regarded him hinted at suppressed anxiety. He thought rapidly and after some moments' delay during which he pretended to be studying the various outfits, he answered. "Yes I've got the money to buy out a hundred such outfits. By this time next year you won't see any of them there."

There was no mistaking the genuine exultation in the other's reply: "Well then, the Round Seven

had ort to pick up considerable. It's them nesters that's be'n crampin' it down. But, you better let me do yer dickerin' fer you. If they know'd you've got the money to buy 'em out, they'll shove up the price on you. They know they can't put over no monkey business on me, an' they know better'n to try it. I'll stay along till fall so's to see you git all straightened out. I aimed to quit this spring. Facts is, I've got me a little outfit together over on Shonkin an' it's gittin' to where they's a livin' in it without me workin' fer wages no more. But I got a man over there that kin look after it all right till fall, and then you kin git along without me, 'cause I'll kind of break in Kid Owens fer to take my place."

"Thanks," answered Connie, "I hope you will stay, and I think we'll locate the trouble with the Round Seven long before fall."

During the homeward ride Connie was aware that more than once the foreman's eyes were fixed upon him in a keen, sidewise glance.

CHAPTER VII

CONNIE MEETS A NEIGHBOR

THE following morning when Connie threw off his blankets and swung his feet to the floor beside his bed he emitted a startled grunt of surprise and pain. "What in thunder is the matter with me?" he muttered, as he rose gingerly to his feet, and stretched his arms above his head. Every muscle of his body from neck to heels was stiff and sore as though he had been pounded with a club. He dressed with an effort and seating himself on the edge of the bed, began laboriously to pull on his boots.

"Come in!" he called, in answer to a knock, and the head and shoulders of the boss were thrust through the doorway.

"How you feelin'?" asked Harmon with a grin, as the boy leaned stiffly over to pull on his other boot.

"Feeling! I feel like I'd fallen off the top of the

highest mountain in the world and hit a rock every ten feet all the way down."

The boss laughed: "Yup, I mistrusted you would. That's what it does to you—ridin' when you ain't used to it. An' they's only one cure fer it—keep on ridin'. It'll pretty near bust you in two to ride to-day, but you got to keep at it. After three or four days you'll be able to ride all day an' never know you done nothin'.

"Breakfast's ready, an' after breakfast me an' Kid Owens, an' old Alex, an' Milk River is goin' to ride after horses. It'll take mebbe a week to git 'em all gathered, an' if I was you I'd kind of hang around till we git back. Tex, he's goin' to stay here to look after the hospital bunch an' the ranch hands will keep on throwin' 'em hay. You better ride a little every day. Tex, he'll saddle up fer you till you git on to it."

"Why can't I ride for horses, too?"

"Holy Smoke! Ridin' after horses is the hardest ridin' they is. It ain't no job fer anyone that ain't broke in to it. We'll be foggin' it all over the range from daylight till dark an' it would jest nach'ly pound a pilgrim to pieces. No, you got to git broke in easy. Ride a spell in the forenoon,

an' agin in the afternoon an' rest up between times. You'll git plenty of ridin' this summer, but you ain't in no shape fer a hard ride, now."

"I guess you're right," answered the boy as he rose to his feet and hobbled stiffly to the dining room.

After breakfast Connie found Nigger standing saddled and bridled in the horse corral, and despite the protest of wracked muscles, he led him out, mounted, and headed for the open range.

A half hour later he pulled up at almost the identical spot from which he and Harmon had surveyed the valley upon the previous day. Three or four miles down the creek he could see the nearest of the two sheep outfits that the foreman had pointed out. "Might just as well go down and get acquainted with my neighbours," he muttered, "that is, if I don't fall apart before I get there."

Nigger picked his way slowly down the steep trail that slanted from the butte, and holding to the bench in order to avoid dismounting to open the gates of the hay pastures, Connie proceeded down the creek.

A wide-spread grey patch appeared in the distance, a patch that seemed to be slowly moving

and shifting about over the dead brown grass of the range. As the boy drew nearer he saw that the grey patch was a band of sheep, and that a man on foot and a dog were following them. He surveyed the feeding sheep with interest. Hundreds and hundreds of them spread out over the bench and threaded their way among the sodden snowdrifts of the coulees. Careful not to disturb them, he circled widely and pulling his horse to a stand beside the nester, called out a cheerful greeting.

The sheep-man eyed him with a hostile glare: "Why didn't you ride right through 'em?" he asked, truculently. "You'll be gittin' fired first thing you know, if Harmon catches you bustin' orders."

"What do you mean?" asked the boy, in surprise.

"Mean! You're ridin' a Round Seven horse, ain't you? I mean why didn't you try to scatter them sheep, or turn 'em back on me, like the rest does?"

"I didn't know you wanted them scattered."

The man laughed nastily. "Harmon wants 'em scattered. You're workin' fer the Round Seven, ain't you?"

Connie hesitated only for an instant, "Yes," he answered, "I'm working for the Round Seven. But, what's that got to do with it? Those sheep don't belong to the Round Seven, do they?"

The sheep-man eyed the boy in astonishment. The look of hostility faded from his eyes, and he drew a step closer: "Say, kid," he said, "you're a pilgrim, all right, I know'd it by the way you ride, an' by the way you swung out fer them sheep. I don't know who you be, nor where you come from, nor why you throw'd in with the Round Seven. But I do know that if you stick with that outfit you'll learn every mean, ornery, crooked, an' low-down trick there is in the cow business. When Bob Harmon gits through with you, you'll mebbe be slick enough to start you an outfit on nothin', the way he done. He busted Mr. Wilson, an' he'll bust the new owner. I hear he's another miner from up around Alasky somewheres, an' Harmon'll bust him, too."

Connie grinned: "Maybe he'll come down and learn the business and find out where the trouble is," he suggested.

"He couldn't do it. Harmon's too slick for 'em. Wilson, he was here, an' Harmon robbed him blind

right under his nose. What with stickin' his own brand on as many Round Seven calves every year as he dares to, an' bein' in kahoots with a crooked commission outfit in Chicago, that sends in short weight returns to Wilson, an' splits the rake-off with Harmon, an' what with sellin' hay to this here Wadell, down the crick an' shovin' the money in his pocket. No wonder it busted Wilson."

"Why didn't you go to Wilson and tell him?" asked the boy.

"A man's supposed to mind his own business in this country," he answered. "If I had, Wilson wouldn't of believed me. Harmon had him fooled complete. An' besides, I've got a wife an' two little kids that I'm tryin' to make a livin' for—an' if Harmon ever got wise that I'd told Wilson anything—well, some fine night I'd turned up missin'—that's all. I don't know what I went an' shot off my mouth to you for. Somehow you don't look like his stripe. I guess mebbe it was you ridin' around the sheep. If you carry what I've said back to Harmon it's all up with me."

Connie smiled: "Don't worry about anything you've told me ever getting to Harmon," he assured. "But, you haven't told me yet, why

Harmon should want his men to scatter your sheep."

" 'Cause he wants to bust me an' put me out of business, that's why. An' he's blame near done it. I had a good outfit started here before the Round Seven come along an' located above me. At that, there would be'n plenty room for both of us. The range is big, an' there's plenty of water. I wouldn't of bothered 'em. Fact is I'd gone out of my way to do 'em a good turn. Fellow named McNamara started the outfit an' I never had no trouble with him. Then he sold out to Wilson, an' Wilson made Harmon foreman, an' from that time on I've had my troubles. What with the Round Seven throwin' in stock around my fences along in August when the range gits pretty well burnt, so they'll see my green alfalfa an' bust through an' eat it an' tromp it in the ground; an' then holdin' the stock in close so they'll eat off the grass that I need fer winter range—look at it! So short that the sheep has got to run their legs off to grab a mouthful here an' there. Look at 'em feed. Them leaders has travelled a mile while we be'n talkin' an' they ought to fill up easy this time a year. I ain't goin' to have no lamb crop to speak of jest

because the ewes has got to run theirself thin to git a livin'. It makes herdin' ten times harder, an' I've used up what little hay I was able to cut after the Round Seven cattle got through with it. Fer the last two years I've jest about be'n able to make both ends meet, an' I ought to be layin' by a little money."

"Couldn't you sue the Round Seven for damages," asked the boy, "and buy the hay?"

The man laughed, bitterly. "This here is a cow country, son. A sheep-man wouldn't stand no show to git damages agin a cow outfit. An' even if I did, where'd I buy hay? They ain't another outfit that raises any hay to speak of within thirty mile of here. I couldn't haul it fast enough to feed it, even if I could buy it. I've tried to buy it from the Round Seven—but Harmon jest laughs at me."

"But, you said he sells it to another sheep outfit down the creek."

"Yes, but that's different. Wadell an' Harmon is in kahoots somehow. Mebbe Harmon's got a share in Wadell's sheep. I couldn't say fer sure. Only I know that he helps Wadell out all he kin. They ain't no cattle shoved over onto him.

He ain't got no legal right to his claim even. He ain't done no ditchin', an' he couldn't hold no claim anyhow, because he's already proved up on one claim over on Shonkin, near where Harmon's ranch is. He's jest squatted there, an' pertendin' he's took up the claim, but he ain't foolin' me. There's two or three more of his stripe located on Beaver, the other side of the Round Seven. I got it figgered out that Harmon got 'em all to come over around the Round Seven for some reason of his own. I don't know why he wants 'em there, but they're all friends of his. Me, an' Bill Samuels, an' Mike Campbell is the only bony fido nesters on Eagle or Beaver. Bill and Mike has got little cow outfits over on Beaver, an' Harmon keeps their stuff scattered to the farthest edges of the range. He's tryin' to bust them, too. His orders is to throw all their stuff out—that is, when his riders sees any of Bill's or Mike's stock they shove it away from home. They've only got a few hundred head apiece, an' they don't run no round-up, so it keeps 'em ridin' all over Montana keepin' track of their stock. No sir, a little outfit ain't got no show agin a big outfit if the big outfit wants to get 'em. But, they's plenty of big outfits

that's run decent, an' try to do the nesters a good turn instead of harmin' 'em. The IX is like that, an' the Circle C. But, the PU an' The Round Seven is different.

"But, isn't it true that the nesters are fencing off all the water?" asked the boy.

"No, it ain't true!" exclaimed the sheep-man indignantly. "How much have I got under fence? How much has Samuels got? And, how much has Mike Campbell got fenced? Jest one forty apiece for hay—that's what we've got fenced. Fencin' costs money an' we ain't fencin' no more than what we have to. It's your crooked little outfit like Wadell that's doin' the fencin'—him an' the others that Harmon has got planted along the cricks. An' the fencin' is done with Round Seven wire! I know. I ain't no fool—but what can I do? Look at the way their claims is laid off—each one of 'em has filed 'em a homestead an' a desert along the crick. That takes care of a mile of water, an' then they've filed their wives on a woman's desert, that takes care of another mile—an' they ain't none of 'em married. They've jest gone to work an' filed these here wives that there ain't no such people. How in time they expect to prove up on

'em I don't know, but they've got four years to figger that out—an' maybe they've got some scheme or other about it. Take Wadell—that ain't his real name, which it's Curry, but he had to change it, 'cause he's holdin' down his claim on Shonkin under his real name, an' I expect the others has all changed their names, too. Them kind changes their names, like honest folks changes their shirt. They dirty one name up by wearin' it a while, an' then they change to another."

"Will you be willing to stand by what you've told me, when the time comes for a show-down?" asked Connie, abruptly.

The sheep-man cast a swift, startled glance into the boy's face. He noted that the lines about the mouth had stiffened, and that the blue-grey eyes that gazed steadily into his own gleamed hard and cold. The fear-inspired denial that his lips had already framed remained unspoken, and came the question: "What do you mean? Who are you? An' what do you mean by a show-down?"

"I mean just this," answered the boy, and in his voice was the ring of determination, "If what you've told me is true, and we can prove that it's true, this cattle country will be a whole lot better

off without Bob Harmon. The state provides a place for just such men as he is, and the others that are working with him. I think I see through their game. I served a year with the Mounted up in the Yukon, and first and last, I helped put quite a lot of his kind where they belonged."

"But—who are you? An' what you doin' down this side of the line? I can't afford to get mixed up in no rookus with Harmon. We're a long ways from the railroad down here. The bad lands butts right up onto us, an' the bad lands is full of outlaws—horse thieves, an' cattle rustlers, an' such. If Harmon ever thought I tipped him off to anyone, my life wouldn't be worth only just the price of a ca'tridge. An' when they found me in some coulee the sheriff an' everyone else would lay it to the outlaws in the bad lands. Harmon he wouldn't think no more of pottin' a man than he would of brandin' a maverick—if he thought he could get away with it. For Gosh Sakes, kid, don't start nothin'! Or you an' me both will git ourn—pronto! But, you ain't told me yet who you be?"

"Morgan is my name," answered the boy, "Connie Morgan. And I'm the new owner of the Round Seven."

"The — owner — of — the — Round — Seven!" Slowly the man's lips formed the words, as he stared incredulously into the grey-blue eyes.

"Yes, the owner of the Round Seven. And I'm down here to clean things up a bit. When I get through this South Slope of the Bear Paws is going to be a healthier place to live in than it is right now. You and I will hit out all right—and the other little outfits, too, that are on the square. But the rest of them are going where they belong. A month from now we'll have them hunting their holes like rats."

The face of the sheep-man had lighted for a moment as he caught something of the boy's enthusiasm, but the light faded, leaving it positively grey with terror. "You can't do it! They's too many of 'em agin' you, an' they're hard men. You ain't got a chance—an' you jest a kid!"

"Look here!" cried the boy impatiently. "I may be just a kid but I've kind of knocked around in places where I've had to use my head. I'm not afraid of Harmon and his bunch of cheap crooks! All I want you to do is to keep your mouth shut about everything that's passed between us. Then when the time comes and Harmon and the rest

of them are locked up in jail, you've got to come to the front with testimony that will put them behind the bars for a long, long time. Will you do it?"

The man pondered for a few moments and a grin slowly twisted his lips: "It ain't no ways in reason that you can get away with it. But, somehow—I guess it's them eyes of yourn—somethin' about you kind of makes me think mebbe you can. Anyhow—here goes! Me, bein' a grown man, had ought to be ashamed not to have as much nerve as a kid. From now on, I'm for you—an' you don't need to wait, if you need me, till them crooks is locked up, neither, But, take it slow, kid, take it slow! If I was you I'd lay low till the calf round-up was far enough along so you can get him with the goods. He'll slap his brand on a lot of Round Seven stuff this spring—an' in Montana, if you want to get a man real good, jest you prove up a job of rustlin' onto him. The Stock Association will back you up, then. If you say so I'll slip the word to Mike Campbell, an' Samuels, an' then if anything comes up where you need friends right quick, they'll be four of us."

"Good idea," assented Connie. "And we'll just

lie low and keep our eyes open till we get the calf-rustling on him, and then we'll clean house."

"It'll sure feel fine to be good neighbors with the Round Seven again," said the man. "Seems like when things gets so bad they jest naturally can't get no worse, luck always changes."

Connie laughed: "A crook has only got about so long to run before he gets caught. The smarter they are, the longer they can get away with it—but they're all fools—or they wouldn't be crooks. Guess I'll be going back, now. So long."

"So long, an' good luck to you!" answered the man, and with a wave of his arm, he sent his dog to head off the leaders of his band of sheep.

CHAPTER VIII

TEX

THE hour that Connie had spent with the sheepmen had given the band time to scatter widely in search of feed, and as the boy approached a deep coulee three frightened ewes came bounding up from its depths. Another followed and just as it topped the rim an evil grey shape closed in on it and Connie caught the flash of a set of gleaming fangs that snapped together within an inch of the terrified ewe's throat. Instantly the boy's service revolver was in his hand, and as the grey shape paused for a second to survey the mounted figure that had interrupted his meal, the gun spoke, and the wolf-like animal sprang into the air and fell to the ground snapping and kicking about on the short buffalo grass. Connie, however, had little chance to watch the death struggle of his victim, for at the sound of the explosion, Nigger sunk his head, and arching his back, shot into the air. He

struck the ground with a jolt that seemed to drive the boy's spine into the base of his skull, and again the horse was in the air. Mechanically the boy dug in his spurs with all his might. With his left hand he hung to the reins. His right still grasped the revolver. Again and again the horse plunged, bucking straight ahead in a series of stiff-legged plunges that jarred and pounded the boy unmercifully. Suddenly he was conscious of the sound of a voice: "Stay with him, cowboy! Stay a long time! Fan him! Hook 'em in! Ride—cowboy—ride!"

But Connie was slipping. One leg left the stirrup, and the next rise of the horse sent him flying in a beautiful arc straight over the animal's head. The boy struck on his hands and knees, and a moment later he was upon his feet. There was a sound of pounding hoofs, and he saw Nigger heading across the bench closely followed by a rider on a curiously spotted horse. The rider was swinging a looped rope about his head. Suddenly the loop shot out and settled about the neck of the fleeing Nigger, and a few moments later the rider was coming toward him, leading the runaway. As he approached Connie recognized Tex, who

greeted him with a grin: "You sure was ridin', boss! But, why in thunder didn't you haul leather? He was buckin' straight ahead an' you could of stayed with him."

Connie returned the grin: "To tell the truth, I never thought of it. But, I don't think I'd have done it if I had. Harmon told me what cattle men thought of a man that would pull leather."

"Oh, he did, did he? Well, that's all right for him to talk. Of course, if you want to put up a fancy ride an' all that sort of stuff, you got to keep your hand off the horn. But, I've seen Bob Harmon pull leather to keep from gettin' busted onto the ground, an' I've pulled leather myself, an' I'll do it every time I've got to, and so will every other cow-hand that's got good sense. Put up as good a ride as you can but if it comes to grabbin' leather or quittin' your horse on the top end of a high one, you jest reach down an' git you a handful every time—unless you're practicin' up for to ride in some circus. I've handled stock longer than Harmon has, an' you can take it from me, they ain't no one but a fool goin' to blame you for haulin' leather when you've got to."

Instinctively, Connie liked this smiling cow

puncher, whose hazel eyes looked steadily into his own. He watched as Tex leaned forward in his saddle and loosened the rope from the neck of the recalcitrant Nigger. There was assurance in his every movement. The boy recalled the easy swing of the looped rope, and the accuracy with which it had fallen about the neck of the flying horse, and he watched now as the man coiled the rope and returned it to its place with the dexterity of long practice. Something about the cowboy reminded him of Waseche Bill—the soft drawl of his voice, or maybe the manner of the kindly advice that was offered as man to man for what it was worth, and not doled out from man to boy in the patronizing manner of a piece of schooling. Possibly it was because of the realization that here was a man who was absolutely competent to do the thing that he set out to do. Despite his youth, Connie Morgan had had wide experience of men. His judgment had disapproved Harmon from the moment of their first meeting, and that same judgment approved Tex. Therefore it was no surprise to the boy when he detected from the man's words that he held the foreman of the Round Seven in a sort of tolerant contempt. And

instinctively Connie knew that this contempt was not engendered by any sense of petty jealousy, but was the natural contempt of a square man for a crook. Here was an ally worth having, but one whose alliance must be earned, not bargained for—an ally who would naturally align himself upon the side of right against wrong.

The boy returned the gun to its holster, and the cow-puncher's glance traveled from the weapon to its victim that lay stretched upon the ground.

"That was good shootin'," he ventured. "But shootin' coyotes won't make no hit with Harmon. It would have be'n as much as our job was worth if one of us had done it."

"Why?" asked the boy in astonishment. "They're a kind of a wolf ain't they? He was just about to kill one of those sheep when I got him."

Tex grinned: "Yeh, they're a kind of a wolf, all right, an' they sure do kill sheep—an that's why Harmon likes 'em. They don't bother the calves none, but they're death on lambs, an' even old ewes. We've got orders not to kill no coyotes. They're gettin' thicker every year around here. John Grey—them was John's sheep—he kills one now an' then with his rifle, but they've learnt to

keep shy of a man afoot, while us fellows can ride right onto 'em. They're slick, coyotes are, they soon learn who to keep out of the way of."

"And Harmon wants them to kill Grey's sheep, is that the idea?"

"That's the size of it."

"He told me all about these nesters—about their fencing off all the water so the range stock can't get any to drink."

"Yes," answered Tex, gravely: "Take John Grey, now; I reckon he's fenced off all of forty rod of water, to keep the range stock out of his alfalfa. But, he might have saved his wire."

"Why?"

"Well, it got busted, an' the cattle et the alfalfa."

"I've just been talking with Grey," said the boy, suddenly. "He told me quite a lot of things about the Round Seven. I'm wondering if they're true."

"Couldn't say," answered Tex, his attention riveted apparently upon the rolling of a cigarette.

"Well, among other things, he told me that the Round Seven cattle were thrown against his fences on purpose so they would break through and eat his alfalfa. Do you know anything about that?"

Tex lighted his cigarette, carefully blew out the match, and flicked it into a patch of prickly pears. "A cow-hand ain't hired to figger on the purpose that's behind the boss's orders. So I couldn't say. All I know is that along last August, when the range was all burnt brown, we fogged a bunch of about four hundred steers around all day on dry range, not lettin' 'em stop to eat, an' about four o'clock in the evenin' we was ordered to swing 'em in against Grey's fences an' leave 'em till mornin'. The alfalfa was green an' cool lookin', an' the water sparkled in the sun, an' the thermometer stood about a hundred. Next mornin' I kind of noticed they wasn't no alfalfa in Grey's field, an' most of his west fence was down flat."

"Who ordered that done?"

"Bob Harmon."

"Did Wilson know it?"

"Can't say what Wilson know'd, or what he didn't know. He was away then—gone for a couple of weeks or so, prospectin' the bad lands."

"Grey told me a lot of other things, too," said Connie, "before he knew who I was."

Tex grinned: "I reckon you got you an earful."

"I did. Among other things I heard that the

Round Seven is a crooked outfit. That Harmon has got nesters to come over here and settle on the creeks, and that the water is fenced off with Round Seven wire, and that Wadell is feeding Round Seven hay to his sheep, and that he's got another claim over on Shonkin that he holds under another name, and that Harmon is stealing Round Seven calves, and that Mike Campbell and Samuels are the only real nesters on Beaver and the others are all fakes. What I want to know, is all this true?"

"What if it would be?" asked Tex, noncommitally.

"If it's true," flashed the boy, "if that's the kind of an outfit I've bought, believe me, there's going to be something doing on the South Slope before long! I've always played a square game, and I'm always going to. I'm here to clean this outfit up, and every crook is going to get hurt!"

"They'll be some considerable pain suffered south of the mountains by the way the moon hangs," opined Tex oracularly.

"Look here, Tex," cried the boy, impulsively. "I've learned to size men up. I've had to do it all my life. You had rather work for a square outfit than a crooked one?"

The cow-puncher pondered the words: "It's be'n quite a spell since I've had the chance," he answered dryly, "I sort of forget."

Connie laughed: "Then what Grey told me is true?" he persisted.

"Let's reason it out," answered Tex. "It's a cinch it ain't poetry, therefore, by the process of elimination, as the feller says, it must be truth."

"The Round Seven is going to need a new foreman very soon," said the boy. "Will you take the job?"

"Is that a bribe? I'm supposed to agree to help git rid of Harmon so I get his job?"

"It is not—and you know it!" exclaimed the boy. "With you, or without you, I'm going to see that Harmon gets what's coming to him. Then the ranch will need someone who is competent to run it. And, I've got a hunch that you're the man."

"An,' dog my cats, if I don't believe you'll do it! Before the mud of Eagle is dried on your boots you've found out more than Wilson ever learnt. I'm for you. An' not because I want to be foreman, neither. I jest want to see how it feels to set in a square game again. But take it slow. We might have some rough work ahead of us. I know

a whole lot already, an' I aim to know more about how things is stacked up. You set tight, boss, an' we'll get the goods on 'em. But, don't let Harmon suspicion you know nothin' till the time's right. Wait till along towards the tail end of the calf round-up—then one of these days you an' me an' the sheriff will pull a little surprise party—somewheres down in the sage brush."

CHAPTER IX

HARMON TALKS

DURING the week that the other riders were rounding up the horses with Bob Harmon, Connie rode the range with Tex, who took pains to initiate him into the cattle business, explaining the every-day details as they presented themselves. This quiet, rather whimsical Texan had been born in the cattle country and had punched cattle in every state in the Union that boasted open range. Habitually conservative in forming friendships, the cowboy's respect and admiration for his young employer grew with the passing of the days. And the respect was mutual, for Connie shrewdly penetrated the other's habitual mask of half-mocking cynicism and evasive tricks of speech, and recognized the real worth of the man.

The boy took keen interest in the work. Each morning after breakfast the two rode through the hospital bunch in the big pasture, the cow-puncher

The sheepman eyed him with a hostile glare. "Why didn't you ride right through 'em?" he asked

cutting out the cattle whose feeding on hay had put them in shape to be returned to the open range. Sometimes three or four, sometimes as many as ten or a dozen were separated from the bunch, driven through the gate, and located on water several miles from the pasture fence. This cutting out process created in the boy a profound respect for the sagacity of the cow-pony, as he watched Tex's horse, Skewball, deftly separate the selected animal from the herd. A half-minute after his rider had picked out an animal, the pinto knew which one was wanted, and thereafter Tex had nothing to do but sit in the saddle while the pony carefully and slowly worked the creature out of the herd. At the edge the animal always tried to turn back, but never succeeded, for knowing that the time for slow work and caution had passed the pony became a thing of magnificent action, turning, twisting, pivoting, anticipating every dodge and rush of the animal that sought vainly to regain the herd.

"It ain't every cayuse that makes a cuttin' horse," explained Tex. "It takes one that's smart, an' one that's quick as a cat, an' has got the speed in him. Most of the range horses are either too

knot-headed to learn the game, or they're too clumsy, or too slow. But Skewball, here, he's a top horse at it."

Under the capable tutelage of Tex, Connie learned to read brands, and as they circled the range in search of weak stock, he practiced, by the hour with his rope, trying to drop his loop over anything and everything, from a patch of prickly pears to a bleeching buffalo skull.

On one of these rides, the two pulled up at a point on the rim of Eagle Creek valley that afforded a view of the Round Seven's lower hay field. A man was pitching hay from a stack onto a hayrack to which a team stood harnessed. "The boys must be feeding from the lower field, today," he said. "I wonder what the idea is, when the other field is so much nearer."

Tex grinned: "That ain't a Round Seven team," he replied. "That's Wadell, an' he's stuffin' his band of wethers full of your hay. Saves him a lot of work herdin' when the range is et down close like it is along Eagle."

"Pretty expensive, isn't it?" asked the boy. "Feeding hay to sheep that could just as well be picking up their living on the range?"

Tex squinted down the valley. "U-m-m, take it as a problem in arithmetic, an' it would run somethin' like this: One fifty-ton stack of hay at twenty dollars a ton equals one thousan' dollars. Startin' on another fifty-ton stack, which it looks like he'd shoveled off about ten ton already, two hundred dollars more. Button, button—who's got the button?"

The boy smiled: "Wadell has got the hay."

"Yup, but the arithmetic don't tell no way to find out who's got the twelve hundred."

"I haven't seen the books of the outfit, yet," said the boy.

"I don't expect they'll be cluttered up none with no hay entries, when you do see 'em," opined the other.

"Do you think Harmon has stuck the money in his pocket?" asked Connie.

"I don't think Wadell had no twelve hundred for him to stick in his pocket. Did you notice the brand on them sheep of his we passed a while back?"

"Yes, they were branded with a Red X."

"Yup, that's right," commented the cow-puncher. "Me, I used to go to school onct, away

back, but there was some of their rules concernin' discipline I couldn't recollect, so they cut me out of the herd an' turned me loose with the wild bunch. But, not before I'd got past arithmetic an' into algebra. Did they ever pitch you algebra for a fattenin' feed?"

"No," laughed Connie, "I never had much schooling."

"Well, I was educated onct plumb up to where it made my head hurt to hold it. It took years of range ridin' before I forgot the heft of it an' relieved the pressure. I'll learn you algebra some day when we're eatin' lunch. It would take a half an hour or so, an' we ain't got time, now. Anyways, in algebra, when you don't know what you're tryin' to find out, you let X equal it. It's easy, after you savvy it." Tex rolled a cigarette, and started his horse after the little bunch of cattle they were driving to the pasture.

"But, what's that got to do with Wadell?" asked the boy, puzzled.

"Oh, that? Well, we want to find twelve hundred dollars. We don't know where it's at, so we'll let X equal twelve hundred dollars. Them sheep of Wadell's is branded with an X. There-

fore, the twelve hundred dollars is in the sheep. P. D. Q., as the geometry books says when they've proved up on a claim. In other words, if I was a lawyer, instead of a mathmatition, I'd advise layin' low without sayin' nothin' about books, or anything else that would make Harmon suspicious. Don't let on you know nothin' about Wadell nor hay, nor John Grey, till I give the word. When we get Harmon right where we want him, we'll close in on him an' the sheriff will be along. At the same time we can attach them sheep, an' see if we can't extract twelve hundred dollars out of 'em, an' at the same time turn Wadell over to Uncle Sam for filin' a fraudulent claim."

An hour later, as they were closing the gate behind the little bunch of old cows they turned into the big pasture, a thunder of hoofs sounded from the bench. "Here comes the horses!" cried Tex. "Come on, we'll help 'em run 'em into the horse pasture," and putting spurs to his pinto, the cowboy headed up a coulee that slanted steeply up to the bench, closely followed by Connie. They gained the upper level as the herd swept by. It was a splendid sight, a hundred horses running free, manes tossing in the breeze, tails

held high, and the noise of their hoofs pounding the buffalo grass like the rumble of thunder, and behind, and on either flank rode the cowboys, urging them on. Tex and Connie joined in at the tail of the herd and the whole remuda swept on up the bench and into the valley of the west branch of Eagle where they were turned into the horse pasture.

Bob Harmon rode beside Connie as the boys headed for the ranch. "Got a hundred an' three head," he said. "We're about seventeen head shy. We generally run a twelve man round-up and I aim to give each man ten horses in his string. I heard there was four of 'em way down acrost Big Sandy, runnin' with some IX horses, but I didn't take time to go after 'em. Half a dozen of 'em's played out an' we left them on the range, an' the rest is somewheres on the range where we kin prob'ly pick 'em up on the round-up; Tex an' Milk River has broke about a dozen bronchos so we'll have enough. How you makin' it? I see you've learnt to ride, all right. I expect the soreness an' stiffness is about rode off by this time, ain't it?"

"Oh, yes," answered the boy. "It only lasted

a couple of days. I've been riding every day, helping Tex with the hospital stuff."

"Ridin' with Tex, eh? I s'pose he's be'n kind of breakin' you in to the cow business." The boy noted that the foreman's eyes had shot him a keen glance, and shifted to the back of the Texan who rode a few paces ahead with Milk River Bill.

"Yes, been trying to teach me to read brands, and throw a rope, how to work a herd, and a lot of things like that."

"He's a good man— when he's a mind to, Tex is," answered the boss. "He's a good hand with horses, an' he savvies the cow business, all right. But, I wouldn't get too thick with him. Not that he ain't all right—maybe. But, well, it's like this, if an owner gits thick with one of the hands it generally always starts trouble somewheres. The other boys sees it, an' it kind of makes 'em grumble. Owners generally don't have no dealin's much with the men, only the foreman, that is, except it's a little yak outfit."

"What's a yak outfit?"

"Nester outfit. An outfit that ain't only got a few head, an' hires all the way from nothin' up to

two or three hands. Them outfits ain't got no foreman, an' the owner runs it hisself. This here Tex, you never know what's a-goin' on in his head. Far's I know he might be all right, but I kind of like to have a man come out now an' then with what he thinks. But him, he ain't never got much to say—just looks at you like he know'd a good joke on you, or somethin', an' he was laffin' at you—only he don't come out an' laff—that's just the way he looks—like he was goin' to. Take these here still fellers like that, an' I wouldn't trust 'em no further than what I could throw a bull by the tail—not that I'm sayin' anythin' agin Tex, nor nothin' like that. But I like to know what's goin' on in a man's head. Course I don't like none of these here mouthy yaps that's always shootin' off their face 'bout everything that ain't none of their business, which them kind don't never know nothin' about nothin'. But Tex, when he does open his mouth an' say somethin', it's generally somethin' that it takes you till day after tomorrow to figger out what he's drivin' at, an' chances is, you can't figger it, then. If it wasn't that men's scurse this year I'd let him go, but I got to hang onto him till after the calf round-

up, anyhow. I've got to dig out tomorrow an' rustle some men. The grass is beginnin' to pick up, an' I want to pull the wagons about the tenth of May. It'll take me mebbe a week to git my riders together."

"We've got four riders beside you and me, now," figured the boy. "You'll have to hunt up eight more. Is that it?"

"I want 'leven riders besides me, an' a day wrangler, an' a night hawk. The remuda has got to be herded night an' day," he explained, "an' run into the rope corral fer the boys to ketch up their horses. That makes thirteen, an' the cook makes fourteen, an' if you're goin' to stay with the round-up, it'll make fifteen. We got to leave one man here besides the ranch hands to handle the hospital bunch, so I got to rustle up nine hands. I know where I kin git holt of some of 'em, but the rest is goin' to be hard to git, what with the IX, an' the PU, an' the Bear Paw Pool all hirin' riders to onct."

"How much do you pay them?" asked the boy.

"Forty dollars a month is goin' wages on this range."

"Pay 'em forty-five, then, and you won't have any trouble getting them."

Harmon laughed: "Not on yer life! If I was to offer forty-five, we'd have the grass all wore off the range fer fellers huntin' a job—an' then it would git us in bad with the other outfits. You see, in the cow business, outfits has got to work together. It's like this: Here's the range strung out fer hundreds of miles an' the cattle from all the outfits all mixed up on it. If every outfit tried to cover the whole range they wouldn't none of 'em git nowheres in all summer. So we divide it up. We work part of it, an' the PU works part, an' the IX, an' the Bear Paw Pool. Each outfit sends a man to ride with each one of the other round-ups. They are the Reps. That way every outfit has got the same number of hands they hire, an' every outfit is represented on each round-up—that's where they git the name of Reps. Each outfit carries brandin' irons of the other outfits. When we drag out a calf that's follerin a PU cow we slap the PU brand on it, an' when they drag out one of ourn they brand it accordin'."

They had reached the ranch and as the boys unsaddled beside the horse corral, and spread

their blankets to dry, the voice of the cook sounded from the kitchen door: "Come on an' git it, or I'll throw it away!" And with a great jangling of spurs, the riders of the Round Seven raced clumsily in their high heeled boots for the wash dish that occupied a bench beside the door.

CHAPTER X

LEFT HANDED BRANDING IRONS

THE following morning Harmon dispatched Milk River Bill to town with a four-horse-team to haul back the supplies for the round-up. An hour later he rode away in search of riders, after issuing orders that set all hands busy overhauling tents, wagons, harness, cook outfit, branding irons, and rope corral; and putting all in shape for the round-up that would take them from the ranch for fifty or sixty days.

Connie took an active interest in everything from the setting of a wagon tire to the overhauling of harness and it was not until late in the afternoon that he found himself alone with Tex.

"Harmon is wondering whether I'm going to ride the round-up," he said, "But I didn't tell him. I wanted to have a talk with you first. Do you think it would spoil our chance of catching him if I went along?"

"On the start it won't make no difference one way or the other. He won't try any monkey business till the wagons are way down behind the Little Rockys, which is the furthest end of the range we work, an' likewise the clostest to the Mizoo. His ranch is over on Shonkin, an' he ferries or flat boats the calves acrost. It's accordin' to how things frames up. One of us has got to be there to keep cases on him so we'll know when to spring our party. I've got a hunch that if you want to ride the round-up I'll be the one that's elected to stick on the ranch an' nurse them hospitals. I seen last evenin' when he found us two together that he figured he'd made a mistake. You see, he ain't got me guessed. He don't like me a-tall. He ain't restin' easy as long as I'm with the outfit, an' yet he don't dare to fire me because he don't know how much I know. He don't like me because he don't savvy me—an' I don't like him because I do—an' there you are. I reckon he'll try to keep us two apart as much as he can anyway till after he gets them calves branded, or else gets rid of me.

"The way it looks from here the best bet would be for you an' me not to pay no attention to one another. You tell him you'll ride the round-up,

an' chances are he'll leave me here at the ranch. Then along at the tail end of the round-up, he an' Alex, an' Milk River, an' Kid will haul out for a couple of days, pertendin' they're goin' to work some creek, an' send the wagons on with a straw boss. They'll be gone a couple of days an' then they'll come back. What you got to do is to stay with the wagons till they get back an' then kind of let on that you're tired of the round-up, er get sick, or somethin' an' hit for the ranch. Then's when we get busy. Meanwhile I'll get holt of McLaughlin, he's the Sheriff, an' Dave Hall, the stock inspector, an' kind of let on that they better be ready to come on the jump when they hear from me. They can get here in a day, an' the next night there'll be somethin' doin' somewheres down in the sage brush."

"But, won't they have time to make away with the calves before we can get back there?" asked the boy.

"No, this here sage brush work is particular business, an' has got to be worked just so. It takes about a week or ten days to work it, an' if everything goes accordin' to Hoyle, it's the safest cattle rustlin' scheme that's be'n invented. What

we got to do is to kind of slip a gravel under their saddle an' upset the dope. When we get through with 'em they'll have a chance to say: 'Good Mornin', Judge,' down to Benton. An' the judge, he'll pick 'em out anywheres from two to twenty years apiece—with most judges favorin' the twenty."

"I don't see how they work it," said Connie. "If he puts his brand on the calves anyone could see that they were following Round Seven cows, and if he waits till the Round Seven brand is on them, how does he get it off?"

"They's a lot of tricks these rustlers is onto. There's three schemes that's used more than others. First, there's the hair artists. They don't use any irons at all. They work with horses, mostly, where they can trail the stuff out of the country and get rid of it quick. All they do is to clip the hair around the brand so it leaves ridges that look just like a brand mark. These ridges connect onto the regular brand and make it look like another brand altogether. Take your own brand for instance," Tex stopped and traced the Round Seven Bar in the dust. 7 "There she is, now some hair artist comes along an' dobs his rope onto a

calf or a colt an' throws an' hog ties 'em an' goes to work. Suppose he leaves a ridge of hair shaped like another Round Seven Bar, reversed, on the right hand side of that brand, with the two bars connected like this: 7f Now when the critter gets up, he ain't a Round Seven critter no more—he's a Flyin' H, plain as day. Of course when the hair grows out he's a Round Seven critter again, but by that time he's be'n trailed clean out of the country, an' sold, an' the hair artist is maybe five hundred miles away doctorin' brands on some other range. That's one way.

"Another way is to alter the brand with runnin' irons. There's two kinds of runnin' irons. One is simply a straight piece of iron that the rustler heats the end of an' traces out a brand, or changes one that's already on, like you would handle a pencil. The other kind is really two irons, a short bar, and a quarter circle. You can make any brand there is with a short bar and a quarter circle, an' of course you can change any brand there is. The runnin' iron work makes a permanent brand, so whatever changin' is done has got to be made into some brand that's recorded. Bob Harmon he don't favor neither one of these ways. He works the

short iron game. Come over to the blacksmith shop a minute, an' I'll show you somethin'. Guess there ain't no one nosin' around. I happened to stumble onto the place where Bob keeps his private short irons cached."

In the blacksmith shop Tex removed a small pile of odds and ends of scrap iron, and lifting a short length of floor planking, reached beneath the floor and drew out a couple of curiously shaped irons. Handing one to Connie he asked: "What do you call them?"

"They're Round Seven branding irons!" exclaimed the boy.

"Yeh, they're Round Seven, all right—but, do you see anything funny about them?"

The boy studied the iron. "Why, it's turned the wrong way!"

"Yup—left handed brandin' iron, all right," grinned the cowboy.

"But, how does he work it? Is his brand the Round Seven Bar turned the other way?"

"No. If it was he couldn't work your brand none. Bob Harmon's Brand is the Heart Bar. It goes on the left side, same as yours. It looks like this:" Connie stared at the brand that the

cowboy traced on the floor. "Do you get the idea?" asked Tex. Connie shook his head. "Well, accordin' to the arithmetic, two times seven is fourteen. But that there is just common sevens, an' not Round Sevens with a Bar through 'em. If you add two of them together, one way you get a Flyin' H, like I showed you. An' added the other way, you get a Heart Bar. Take this here reversed Round Seven Bar, ƒ an' *your* Round Seven Bar, an' shove 'em together, an' you get the Heart Bar, an' that's Bob's brand. The way he works it, he's pretty safe. He waits till the wagons get way down back of the Little Rockys where there ain't no ranches to bother, an' after they get a bunch of calves branded with your brand, Bob an' Alex, an' Milk River, an' Kid Owens, they slip away from the outfit an' round-up anywhere from twenty-five to a hundred head of cows an' fresh branded calves, an' drive 'em to a sage brush corral he's got hid down there somewheres. They run the calves into the corral, an' leave the cows outside. His man that looks after his outfit is there waitin' an' he camps there right handy. Bob an' the boys go back to the wagons for a week or ten days. Meanwhile this other bird stays right there an' watches

that corral from some pinnacle where he can see a good swipe of country. The cows are circlin' around the fence tryin' to get to the calves, an' they're bawlin' their heads off. Inside the fence the calves are tryin' to get out an' they're bawlin' as loud as the cows. As long as no riders get within earshot everything is lovely. In about a week or ten days the cows give it up, an' go away. All this time this lookout has be'n feedin' the calves, an' by the time the cows pull out they're weaned. Then Harmon an' his gang come back, an' they slap his reversed iron on the calves, makin' a Heart Bar out of your Round Seven Bar, an' then they drive them to the river an' ferry 'em across."

"But, suppose someone would happen along and hear the cows and calves bawling, and decide to investigate?" asked the boy.

"They wouldn't find out nothin'. The lookout would see 'em comin' from his perch, an' would beat it down an' open the corral gate. When the investigatin' party got there, all he'd find would be a bunch of Round Seven cows with Round Seven calves follerin' 'em, all regular an' proper."

"But, suppose someone should run across them

driving the calves to the river?" persisted the boy. "Wouldn't it look kind of funny to see a lot of young calves with one-half of their brand new, and the other half old?"

"It ain't likely they would meet up with anyone way down there," answered the cowboy. "Specially as this corral is right close to the river. But he plays pretty safe by slappin' on his brand before the Round Seven brand has had time to heal up. If anyone did come Harmon would scatter the calves in the sage an' round 'em up later. He's got it worked out pretty slick, all right—but, he's about played his string out. This year he'll prob'ly brand up a big bunch, 'cause he figures on quittin' this fall, an' he'll want to make a clean-up."

CHAPTER XI

THE WAGONS ROLL

It was quite an imposing calvacade that pulled out of the Round Seven home ranch a week later, and struck westward, skirting the bad lands. Breakfast had been eaten by lamplight, and in the first grey of dawn the boys had harnessed the work horses to the wagons, roped out their saddle horses and mounted amid yells of encouragement and banter for those whose horses "sunk their heads."

Harmon had designated the fork of a certain creek some ten miles away as the location of the first camp of the round-up. Kid Owens acting as "pilot" pulled out ahead, closely followed by the remuda, consisting of one hundred and fifteen saddle horses, and twelve extra wagon horses, in charge of Milk River Bill and a full blooded Gros Ventre Indian, named Roy Longknife, who had been hired as day wrangler. Behind the remuda

rode Harmon and Connie and ten cowboys. And following them came the grub wagon, with Walt Jones, the cook, on the seat, handling the six restive horses with the air of a circus band-wagon driver. The bed wagon brought up the rear. This, also, was a six-horse wagon, which contained the tents and was piled high with the ponderous bed rolls of the cowboys. The "night hawk," as the night remuda herder is called, drove this wagon. He was a Brule Sioux breed named Sam Shanto and he handled his plunging six-team with an air of bored indifference, a limp cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth.

On the rim of Eagle Creek valley Harmon pulled up and the riders gathered about him. "All right, boys," he cried, "we're off! Gather all cows an' calves, an' everything you run onto that ain't branded. You all know where the wagons will be camped at the fork of Dry Box Elder. Alex, you take five of 'em with you an' circle along the edge of the mountains, drop off a couple of riders every three or four miles, an' I'll take the rest an' circle south along the bad lands. Try to get in by ten-thirty, so we kin work herd, an' make a good sized circle this afternoon."

"How about nester stuff?" asked a new man.

"Shove everything that wears a nester's brand on ahead of you," ordered Harmon. "This outfit scatters nester stock as wide as it kin."

Connie wanted to countermand the order, but fearing that any interference with the foreman at this time would upset the plans of Tex, who true to his prediction had been left at the ranch, he remained silent.

The boy rode beside Harmon, who swung toward the bad lands with his half of the riders. And as they rode the foreman explained the working of the round-up. "We drop off a couple of riders every few miles, an' they work the range between them an' the wagons, gatherin' all the cows an' calves. We don't bother the beef stuff on the spring round-up. When they git in with their stuff some of 'em holds herd—ridin' around 'em to keep 'em bunched, an' some rides through the bunch ropin' out the calves by the hind legs an' draggin' 'em to the fire where they're branded. When the herd is all worked, they're turned loose an' the afternoon circle starts. There's two circles a day, an' two herds to work, then next mornin' the outfit moves on ten or twelve miles an' the

same thing all over again. They's more work to the calf round-up than there is to the beef round-up, but there ain't no night guard to stand because we don't hold nothin' over night."

After the last two men had been dropped off, Harmon and Connie continued on for three miles or more and then swung northward.

"You see," explained Harmon, "We're right now just about due south of where the wagons is camped. We head north, with what we gather. Alex, he'll be just about due north of the wagons, an' he'll head south with his stuff. The other boys will gather everything between, so you see the range east of the wagons has all be'n worked."

"I see," said the boy. "But, why don't you drop the boys off one at a time? I should think you could cover more ground that way."

"We could cover more ground, all right. But cow-hands always work in pairs on circle. One man can't handle stuff to do any good. Sometimes a cow gits on the prod an' one man can't do nothin' with her, an' then when he'd git quite a bunch gathered an' they'd start breakin' back, he couldn't handle 'em. It takes two men, an' even then sometimes they've got their hands full."

Connie and Harmon were the last ones in, and as they shoved their thirty cows, each followed by a young calf into the herd, the cook called dinner. Leaving four men on herd, the boys all raced their horses for the wagon, where they unsaddled in an incredibly short time and turned their horses into the rope corral where the wrangler was holding, the remuda. Selecting tin plates, cups, knives, forks, and spoons, from a huge dish-pan, the boys formed in line and passed by the huge sheet iron stove where Walt Jones, roll-sleeved, and bedecked in a flour-sack apron, filled each plate to overflowing with fresh beef, potatoes, and canned corn. Each man filled his own cup from the huge coffee pot that was boiling on the back of the stove, and then seating himself on the ground, proceeded to put the well-cooked dinner where it would do the most good. A huge section of dried apple pie completed the meal, and depositing the dirty dishes in another huge dish-pan the boys walked to their saddles, procured their ropes, and stepping over the single rope supported on stakes, that formed the "fence" of the corral, proceeded to rope out their horses. A half dozen caught up "cut horses," trained cow-ponies wise in the tricks

of herd working, while the remainder selected any horse from their string that their fancy dictated.

Milk River Bill, who rode the "rough string," which was made up of the new horses just broken by himself and Tex, furnished much entertainment, by roping out and saddling a particularly vicious broncho which as soon as the rider was in the saddle cut loose and bucked high, wide, and handsome, to the huge delight of all hands. Milk River was a real "broncho twister," and Connie found himself yelling approbation with the others as the man, with the ease of long practice, maintained his seat while the maddened horses "sunfished," "swapped ends," and bucked and pitched with every trick in the box. Calmly the cowboy sat his saddle and each time the horse's feet hit the ground with the nasty stiff-legged jolt, the quirt descended about his ears, first on one side, then on the other, while the spurs raked and scratched him from shoulder to flank. Not once during the performance did Milk River reach for the horn, and finally, exhausted, and steaming with sweat the broncho gave up, and trotting clumsily under the strange weight on his back, he followed the other horses to the herd.

It was not a large herd, and by noon the branding was finished and the cattle turned loose, a milling, roaring, horde of bellowing cows hunting for their calves from which they had become separated in the mix-up, and of bawling calves searching for their mothers.

Again the wrangler corraled the remuda, and once more the cowboys changed horses for the afternoon circle. At half-past four the new herd was in, consisting of all stock picked up from the range within five or six miles to the westward of the wagons. Supper was eaten at quarter to five, and the herd worked afterward. It was during the working of this afternoon herd that Connie witnessed an incident, by no means uncommon on the round-up, that showed the absolute necessity for alertness and quick action in the handling of range stock. In making a pivot turn, a cow pony went down among the feet of the milling, frenzied herd of cows. The moment man and horse disappeared, two riders dashed at top speed for the spot, slashing right and left with their quirts, and forcing their horses through the mass of cattle. A moment later one of the horses whirled and dashed out of the herd, and Connie saw that the

cowboy whose horse had gone down was running beside the horse, with a hand gripping the stirrup leather. So fast was the rider urging his horse, that the man running beside him had all he could do to keep his feet. The next instant a roar of laughter went up from a dozen throats, as the rider, well clear of the herd, suddenly swerved his horse, and the unfortunate runner, not letting go in time, rolled heels over head across the buffalo grass to the accompaniment of the jeers and jibes of his fellows. Connie laughed with the rest, but wondered at the spirit of fun that would prompt a man to risk life and limb to rescue a comrade from the hoofs and horns of the maddened cattle, and then seek to break the rescued one's neck by sending him rolling end over end across the bench. But the man got up laughing as hard as the rest, and brushing the grass from his hair chaps, he mounted his horse that had been led from the herd by the second of the two riders who had rushed to his aid, and mounting, resumed his work as though nothing had happened.

At eight o'clock in the evening, another meal was served, called "cocktail lunch" for want of another name, and after that the remuda was

turned over to the "night hawk," and the outfit went to bed.

Four o'clock in the morning found them at breakfast, and a half hour later, while it was yet too dark for Connie to distinguish one horse from another, the cowboys were in the corral, roping out their saddle horses with unfailing accuracy.

"I don't see how they can pick out their own horses in the dark," he said, as he stood beside the boss who, rope in hand, was waiting his turn in the corral.

"They save the markers for mornin' circle," explained the boss. "You notice they ain't none of 'em leadin' out solid color horses. They save the bays, an' blacks, an' sorrels, an' greys for afternoon circle, an' herd holdin'. See that horse comin' out? He's got two white legs, an' the one Kid is saddlin' yonder, is a blaze-face, an' Milk River has caught him up a pinto with a big spot on his side, an' Alex is saddlin' a roach mane cayuse, an' that's the way it goes, each one pickin' him out a horse that's marked plain enough to tell in the dark. I'll rope you out one, now—there's one of yourn." The boss slipped under the rope

and flipped his lariat loop over the neck of a bay. "See, he's got three white feet—that's how I know'd him, he's a marker."

Connie rode with the foreman that day, and for several days following, and as he rode he took pains to absorb every possible detail of the cattle business as it presented itself. He learned the nester brands, and the brands of the other big outfits—no small task when some of these outfits like the Bear Paw Pool, and the PU ran from fifty to one hundred brands each.

"What in thunder do they want so many brands for?" he asked Harmon one day when they ran across a freshly branded PU calf following a Block-Dot cow.

"Them big outfits is built up out of a lot of smaller ones," explained the boss. "They buy up some little outfit, an' then instead of going to the trouble of ventin' the brands an' brandin' 'em over, they buy brand an' all an' let the old stuff run with the little outfit's brand, but they brand all the calves with their own brand. After a few years the old brands naturally peter out—the beef gets shipped, an' the old cows dies, an' the young stuff all wears PU brands. But in the meantime

it sure gives their riders somethin' to do keeping all them brands in their head."

Some days Connie would not ride circle, but saddling a horse would take a long ride alone. And it was on one of these rides that he made the acquaintance of another of his neighbors.

In a dry coulee he had run across a dozen or more K–2 cattle. The K–2 brand belonged to Mike Campbell, and the Round Seven boys, under Harmon's orders, had been pushing them farther and farther from home as they encountered them on the range. Campbell was one of the nesters of which Grey, the sheep-man, had told him, and the boy headed them back and shoved them four or five miles toward home. As he rounded a bend in a creek-bed he was following he came face to face with a rider. The man pulled up, eyed the cattle indifferently, as they passed him, and as Connie halted his horse beside him, returned the boy's greeting with a nod, threw an overall-clad leg over the horn of his saddle, and proceeded to roll a cigarette.

"Sort of shovin' them critters the wrong way, ain't you?" he asked blowing a cloud of smoke into the air.

Connie grinned: "What makes you think so?" he countered.

"Well, you're forkin' a Round Seven horse—an' Round Seven shoves K–2 stuff *out*, not *in*. Or, mebbe you got turned around. Sort of figgerin' west fer east?"

"No—I don't get turned around," answered the boy. "But, what do you care which way the Round Seven shoves K–2 cattle?"

"It sort of makes a little difference in the ridin' I've got to do," answered the man dryly. "My name's Campbell—Mike Campbell, over on Beaver, an' the K–2 belongs to me."

"And mine's Morgan—Connie Morgan, over on Eagle, and the Round Seven belongs to me."

"I mistrusted that's who you was," replied the man, gravely. "Grey told me about you buyin' the outfit. Then, it's true—what Grey said?"

"Depends on what he said," laughed the boy.

"He said that you was jest a kid, but when you got strung out, he reckoned you'd kind of change things over to the Round Seven. He said you was goin' after certain parties that has be'n playin' the game both ways from the middle, an' that when the smoke blow'd away us little fellows

would git a square deal from the Round Seven."

"Grey told it to you straight," answered the boy. "For a little while yet your cattle keep on getting shoved *out*. Those are the foreman's orders, and I've got good reason for not interfering with him till the proper time comes. After that, the order will be reversed, and the Round Seven will throw nester cattle *in*—and anything else the Round Seven can do to help you, it will be glad to do. There's plenty of room here for all of us, and life's too short to be fighting over nothing."

"You said a mouthful, Morgan," the man replied, "I didn't hardly dast to believe Grey when he told me. It'll make a lot of difference to us little fellows to be good friends with the Round Seven. An' they's ways we kin kind of show we 'preciate it." The man glanced about him, his eyes sweeping the rim of the valley. "If your good reason you was speakin' about a while back has got somethin' to do with a sage brush corral, down clost to the Mizoo, mebbe I kin start in doin' you a good turn previous to the smoke blowin' away. Facts is, I might git in an' help make some of the smoke, if you say so."

"You bet I say so!" exclaimed the boy. "But, what do you know about the sage brush corral?"

"I know where it's at—that's all. Me an' Samuels found it two year ago, an' we've watched Harmon slap his own brand on Round Seven calves down there. 'Count of it's bein' dog eat dog, far as we was concerned, we never said nothin', but sometime we aimed to turn what we knew to account."

"And now's the time!" cried the boy. "We'll be down there with the wagons in a few days, and Harmon will start to work his game—then we will get busy." He paused, and then asked abruptly: "Do you know Tex?"

"What Tex? You mean the one that rides fer the Round Seven?"

"Yes."

"Sure, I know him."

"Well, he's at the ranch looking after the hospital bunch. You slip over there and tell him what you've told me, and when the time comes we'll gather in the Harmon gang with the goods on 'em."

"This here Tex," said the man. "You sure he's

on the level? You sure he won't go to Harmon an' spill what he knows?"

"Dead sure," answered the boy. "He's going to be the new foreman of the Round Seven. He's absolutely on the square, and you can save us a lot of time in rounding up the cattle thieves, because we figured we'd have to hunt for the corral. You see, Tex was onto their game, but he didn't know the location of the corral."

"All right, Morgan—you can count me in—me an' Samuels, an' Grey. It'll sure feel good to be livin' onct more amongst white men!"

CHAPTER XII

HARMON SHOWS HIS HAND

EVENTS shaped themselves much as Tex had predicted. The routine of the round-up never varied, and the wagons worked gradually into the country behind the Little Rockys.

One day, two weeks after Connie's meeting with Campbell, Harmon pulled out on morning circle accompanied by McLaurie, Kid Owens, Milk River, Connie and one of the new men. "You better drop off an' ride short circle this mornin'," said the foreman, as he rode at Connie's side. "The long circles takes us down into them breaks along the bad lands, an' the way them cayuses is goin' to have to claw up an' down them ridges, it's goin' to be all an old hand wants to do to stay on—let alone a new beginner."

This was the first move in the game. Connie

knew instantly that today the calves would be run into the sage brush corral, and then left in care of the look-out until the cows got tired of walking around the fences. The boy never batted an eye: "All right," he replied, "You say when, and we'll swing in. Who's going to be my partner?"

Harmon's eyes swept his riders, as though making a choice. "I guess I'll let Comstock go with you," he answered casually. "He's a new man on the outfit, and these other boys knows the country."

"I'll be kind of glad to ride the short circle," said the boy, with a yawn. "This riding every day, and all day, gets tiresome when you haven't been at it any longer than I have. I've been figuring on going back to the ranch for a while to rest up."

"Couple weeks of rest would do you good," assented the foreman. "You be'n hangin' right to it for quite a spell, now. 'Course us fellows is use to it an' don't notice it none, but I've saw a many a pilgrim hit the round-up that didn't stay with it as long as what you have."

"I'll stick along for a few days," answered the

boy. "And then if I don't feel rested up, I'll lay off for a while."

"Sure. You kin ketch onto us agin when we swing in past Bird Tail. We won't be no more'n about fifteen mile from the ranch then."

A few miles farther on, the foreman drew up and indicated the course of the short circle, and Connie and Comstock swung back toward the wagons. The boy was not in the least surprised when the noon herd was worked to find that Harmon and the others who had accompanied him were still out. It was nearly dark when they appeared without any cattle and turned their horses into the remuda.

"We run onto some of them saddle horses I told you was on the range, an' tried to pick 'em up, but they was runnin' with a bunch that ranges down into the bad lands, an' they run us ragged. We never got 'em, at that, an' we run our horses to a frazzle."

For five days Connie rode the range, choosing short circle and feigning extreme lassitude. The sixth day he spent lying in the shade of the bed wagon and on the morning of the seventh, saddled his horse and pulled out for the ranch.

"Plumb wore out," grinned Harmon, with a wink at Kid Owens. "I sure do hate to lose a hand right in the middle of the round-up. But that's the way with them coffee-coolers, they kin come an' go as they like, while us pore cusses has got to stay on the job twenty-five hours out of the twenty-four. But never mind, I'll be one myself after the beef round-up. An' that'll give you a chanct to see how good you be at runnin' the Round Seven. If you save up like I done, an' don't blow yer money, in a few years you kin quit, too—an' maybe we kin throw in together an' have a reg'lar outfit."

The two were the last to leave camp that morning, and as they disappeared over the rim of the coulee, Walt Jones, the cook, grinned as he seated himself on the wagon tongue with a paring knife in his hand and a half bushel of spuds at his feet.

"Plumb wore out," he repeated. "Didn't eat no more'n four meals yesterday, an' nibbled along at his breakfast this mornin', not bein' able to put no more'n two cuts of pie on top of a pound of steer an' a double helpin' of fried spuds." One after another the potatoes, stripped of their peel-

ing, splashed into the boiler of water at his side. "I ain't wised up to this kid, yet, but I know Harmon's game, all right. An', believe me, if I was him I'd be right now headin' straight acrost the flats, an' you couldn't see me fer dust till I'd crossed the Rio Grande! This here sudden onwee that's afflictin' the big boss ain't no idle jest, as the feller says, an' I'm a sheep-herder if that head of his'n ain't more useful than jest a combination hair meadow an' hatrack." He paused and spat accurately upon the spiney pad of a prickly pear, "Harmon aims to be a coffee cooler after the beef round-up, but I'll miss my guess if he don't start in coolin' coffee right in the middle of the calf round-up—an' some more along with him—an' the State of Montany'll pay fer the coffee."

Tex was just turning a little bunch of old cows into the big pasture when Connie hailed him from the rim of the bench. A few minutes later he joined the cowboy and together they rode toward the ranch house, Tex listening while Connie detailed the events of the round-up.

"Don't let on to Canary or Tombstone," he cautioned, as they approached the corral where

the two ranch hands were unharnessing their teams. "I don't know how they stand, and anyhow there's a whole lot of things a man can't blab if he don't know 'em. I seen McLaughlin the other day, an' it's all fixed with him an' Hall to come a-runnin' when I yelp. Tomorrow we'll ride over an' pick up Campbell an' Samuels an' then in the evenin' we'll meet up with the sheriff an' the stock inspector over to Lloyd an' from there we'll all make a night ride down along the edge of the bad lands an' hole up in some mud crack where we can hear them old cows bawlin'."

"Did Campbell see you?"

"Yup."

"How about Grey? He wanted to be in on it, too."

"We don't need him," answered Tex. "Grey, he's got him a wife an' kids. An' if things should happen to git rough down there it ain't no use of him gittin' plugged. It don't make no difference about us fellows—but I'd hate to see anything happen to Grey. They've had a hard enough time a-ready."

"Aren't Campbell and Samuels married?"

"Campbell ain't, an' Samuels—well, Samuels,

he wishes he wasn't. Roundin' up rustlers will be a plumb restful an' peaceable vacation for him, his daily life bein' turbulent an' tribulatious to an extent it makes common gun-play look tranquil an' placid."

The two put up their horses and entering the ranch house, Tex went immediately to the telephone and rang Red Bank. "Hello, Sally!" he called into the transmitter, "Say, Sally, you see if you can get holt of McLaughlin an' tell him to call up Tex at the Round Seven, will you? All right, the quicker, the sooner—much obliged." Tex lighted the fire in the cook stove, and set the kettle to boil. Presently the telephone bell rang, "Two long an' three short. That's us!" Tex picked up the receiver: "Hello, Mac. Yeh, this is Tex. Say, Mac, you still want to sell that buckskin? . . . Well, I might. He ain't much 'count, but if you happen to be comin' out into the mountains tomorrow, jest fetch him along, an' I'll meet you at Lloyd along about dark. There's five different men tryin' to sell me a horse. If you see Dave Hall ask him if he's got me a brand figgered out, yet. I'm lookin' for a horse that'll pack a man an' his blankets an' a couple days' grub.

The new boss here is lookin' for one too, an' so is Mike Campbell, an' Samuels. If yer cayuse is all right, you can get rid of him easy, even if you an' me can't dicker. So long."

"Well, that's that," said the cowboy, as he dipped some flour from the barrel.

"But, you didn't tell him anything about Harmon!" said Connie.

Tex grinned: "I told him all he wants to know. You see, with these here party lines, if you got any particular business that ain't for general publication, you got to kind of figger a round about way of sayin' it. There's eighteen different ranches strung along that wire an' every time a phone rings every one dives for the receiver. Why, jest while I was talkin', I heard twelve different suppers fryin', besides Hansen's baby squealin', an' Kearful's phonygraft."

"But, the sherrif won't come clear out to Lloyd just to sell a horse, will he?"

"No. But, he'll be there. You see what I told him was that the rustlers was to work, an' there was five of 'em, an' he'd need his blankets an' a couple days' grub, an' he needn't bother to bring no one else along except Dave Hall, 'cause there'd

be me, an' you, an' Samuels, an' Mike Campbell waitin' for him. The way I told it to him none of them folks that was hornin' in to get 'em an' earful of someone else's business can tip it off to Harmon. All they could savvy was me an' McLaughlin raggin' about a private horse trade." Tex sliced boiled potatoes into the frying pan and added a generous portion of bacon grease. The door opened to admit the two ranch hands. "Here, you Canary, mix up a batch of sinkers, an' Tombstone, you shovel a couple handfuls of Java into that coffee pot, an' then fetch in an armful of firewood. We'll have supper ready in about two jerks. Hello, two shorts, a long, an' a short. That's Two Dot's ring." Tex beat Canary to the telephone by an arm's reach, and noiselessly lifting the receiver placed it to his ear. Five minutes of silence followed, and the cowboy returned the receiver to its hook.

"Two of Jerry Kearful's kids has got the measles, an' that black colt of his et somethin' an' he's all bloated up. Mrs. Two Dot's goin' down to Kearful's Sunday an' stay an' help take care of the kids."

"Prob'ly ain't measles," opined the doleful

Tombstone. "Prob'ly small poxt. They'll die, an' Mrs. Two Dot, she'll git it an' spread it up an' down the crick. I had it onct."

"You couldn't of had it!" exclaimed Canary, scrutinizing Tombstone's face. "I know'd a feller onct that had it, an' his face looks like some one had busted him one with a charge of bird shot."

"I did, too!" vociferously maintained Tombstone. Although inseparable cronies, these two were engaged in petty bickerings from daylight to dark. "Guess I'd ort to know. Down on the Musselshell, it was. I was hayin' for the Big Six outfit, an' the foreman sent twenty mile fer a doctor. He was a good doctor, too—jest as good on folks as he was on horses an' cattle, an' sheeps, an' besides that he was a blacksmith. Cost me five dollars, so you might know he wasn't no bum doctor."

"He soaked you. It wasn't worth more'n two."

"Oh, I don't know. I figger it ort to be worth five dollars to a man to git his life saved. I can't have small poxt no more, but you fellers kin. Chances is, you'll have it bad an' I'll have to hay them cattle alone, besides stoppin' to do all the cookin' an' bury you all to boot. Wisht the boys

was back off the round-up. An' that colt of Kearful's, chances is, he can't save him. When they git the bloats, it's all up with 'em. He'd ort to give him sody, an' milk, an' turpentine shuck up in a quart bottle."

"Why don't you tell him, if you know so much. His ring is a long an' a short, an' a long."

Tombstone advanced to the instrument and gave the required ring. "Hello, Kearful, is that you? Heard how yer kids has got the small poxt . . . What, measles? That's what you think, but it sounds to me like the small poxt. I'd ort to know, I had it . . . Do fer it? Give 'em some medicine, an' put 'em to bed, an' burn the bed an' their clothes . . . What kind of medicine? What kind you got? Well give 'em that, then. Chances is, if you wait till you git some other kind, they'll die on you. An' that there black colt that's bloated, you better give him a dost of sody, an' milk, an' turpentine. Git about a quart of it down him . . . You ain't got no turpentine? Well, you might try kerosene, then . . . You're welcome. Good bye."

"It's sure comfortin', livin' way out here like we do," said Tex, with an elaborate wink at

Connie, "to know we got a good doctor right here in the house."

"I s'pose you think I don't know nothin' about doctorin'," said Tombstone, "but, I doctored a bloated horse onct with sody, an' milk, an' turpentine."

"Yeh, but not kerosene," grinned Tex. "How come you told him kerosene?"

"You got to use yer head, doctorin', same as anything else. You use turpentine fer thinnin' out paint, don't you? Well, one time we was paintin' a barn, an' we run out of turpentine, an' we thinned the paint with kerosene, an' that shows they're about alike, don't it?"

"Guess so," admitted Tex. "Did the horse you doctored get well?"

"No, he died. But, that's the way with sick horses. All you kin do is give 'em what you got handy, an' if their time's come they'll die anyhow, an' if it ain't they'll git well. Come on, supper's ready."

It was a rather grim-faced group of horsemen that pulled out of the little town of Lloyd the following evening, and struck southward through

the mountains. The moon rose as they rounded the shoulder of Saw Tooth and pushed out into the open country to the south-eastward. At the edge of the bad lands, Mike Campbell took the lead and for several miles the others followed in silence as the nester skirted the heads of innumerable draws and coulees that led into the maze of mud cracks and pinnacles and barren ridges that comprise the bad lands. The lop-sided moon was almost directly over head when the man turned abruptly into a dry wash that soon became a well defined coulee, and later a canyon with perpendicular sides of disintegrating rock. For miles the night horsemen followed the tortuous winding of the canyon, whose floor was bare, and dry, and hard as the paved street of a city. Mouths of innumerable connecting canyons yawned black on either side, and as he rode behind the sheriff, Connie realized why it was that the bad lands had become a refuge and a sanctuary for outlaws and hunted men. For they consisted of an intricate network of canyons and mud cracks, the almost total lack of feed and water for horses, and the fact that very few men besides the outlaws themselves, knew the bad lands, and those few were

ranchers and cowboys who lived nearby, and who did not dare to act as guides to any posse the sheriff might lead in, for the reason that the outlaws would have retaliated by ambushing them at the very first opportunity.

It was into one of the yawning side canyons that Mike Campbell turned after a couple of hours of riding through the darkness. The sides of this new canyon, whose general direction was east and west, were less abrupt than those of the main canyon, and here and there upon their surface, Connie could see patches of coarse bunch grass. An hour later the guide halted, the others drew in beside him, and all sat in silence broken only by the creak of saddle leather, and the occasional movement of a horse. After some moments a sound was borne to their ears upon the soft night wind. It was the bawling of a far-off cow. Another cow joined in, and then another, and Dave Hall, the stock inspector nodded to McLaughlin.

"We're in time, all right," said the sheriff. "It'll be anyway a day or two yet before the cows will quit the corral. But, in the meantime, what are we goin' to do fer water an' horse feed?"

For answer, Campbell started his horse, and a

few minutes later, led the party into a shallow buffalo grass basin formed by the widening of the walls of the canyon. "Here's feed, an' over yonder about twenty rod, there's a spring of good water. We can lay here fer a week if we need to. Harmon's corral is about four mile due east of here, on a thick sage flat. We're almost on the edge of the bad lands, but fer enough in so they won't no one be botherin' us, an' near enough so we can hear when them cows quits bellerin'. They's a rock pinnacle about a half a mile from here, where we can post a lookout. They've got to cross a couple of miles of flat where the sage is thin before they git to the corral, an' we kin watch 'em go in."

The spring proved to be of ample proportion for the needs of the party. After each had satisfied his thirst, Campbell filled an ample coffee-pot, and a kettle, the horses were unsaddled, watered, hobbled, and turned loose to feed.

"We got to do all our cookin' at night," said Campbell. "We can hide the blaze easy enough, but that there lookout at the corral might see our smoke if we build a fire daytimes." The water from the spring flowed for a few rods across the basin before becoming completely absorbed by the

thirsty ground. Along this tiny watercourse a scrubby growth of cottonwood, chokecherry, and a stunted bull pine or two had sprung up, and it was upon this meagre source of supply that Campbell drew for his firewood. After a meal of bacon, store bread, and coffee, the tired men spread their blankets on the grass, and soon were fast asleep.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SAGE BRUSH CORRAL

It was a long and tedious wait—the three days the little party spent in the buffalo grass basin. For the first two days and nights the bawling of the cows told them that there was no use in even posting a lookout. On the morning of the third day, although the wind blew gently from the eastward, no sound came from the direction of the sage brush corral.

"They'll be along, prob'ly, to-day, or to-morrow," predicted Campbell. "They ain't goin' to leave them calves onbranded no longer'n what they have to. Guess I'll jest slip over to that pinnacle an' keep an' eye out fer 'em."

After the noon luncheon, McLaughlin relieved Campbell, and he in turn was relieved by Tex at supper time. It was nearly dark when the cowboy returned to the basin. "Well, they're over there," he announced. "Four of 'em drifted acrost the

flats. That would be Harmon an' Kid Owens, an' Milk River, an' Alex. Countin' the lookout, that makes five, to our six."

"How do you figure 'em, Tex?" asked McLaughlin. "You know 'em better than we do."

"The only real bad actor in the bunch, as far as gun play goes, would be Kid Owens. Harmon, he's yellow, when you get right down to cases, an' so's Alex. Milk River, he might back up the Kid's play if he thought there was a chance to get away with it, an' I don't know the lookout, but I reckon he's a sort of a ranch hand that Harmon's got workin' over on his claim, so we don't need to worry about him."

"You think the Kid would really try to start something?" said Hall.

Tex grinned: "He's like a broncho—he's got a lot of guts, but no brains. He packs one gun in a holster, an' another tucked away in the front of his shirt. So, if you ever tangle up with him, jest remember to keep your eye on his other hand. He's one of these kind that thinks Billy the Kid, an' Jesse James, an' the Dalton boys was real men. He ain't all bad, the Kid ain't. He'd give you the

shirt off his back, if he likes you. He's got a bad start, that's all—he's a fool."

"Bad start makes a good endin', as the sayin' goes," reminded Hall.

"Well, then the Kid'll be a bishop—if he don't get hung first, or shot," laughed the cowboy. "But when the time comes for the show-down over there in the sage brush, you better leave the Kid to me. I'm onto his curves—an' he knows it. Chances are we can get out without any gun play."

"How you figgerin' on workin' it, Mac?" asked Campbell.

"'Cordin' to the lay of the land," replied the sheriff. "How close can we get to the corral without bein' spotted by the lookout?"

"By keepin' to the coulees we kin git to within a quarter of a mile on the horses, without our heads showin', above the rims. After that it's jest a question of crawlin' up through the sage. Me an' Samuels slipped up to within ten rod, last year, an' layed an' watched 'em brand the whole batch."

"Why didn't you report them?" asked the sheriff.

Campbell shrugged: "They wasn't my calves they was brandin'. An' what's more, I've got my

full growth by mindin' my own business. S'pose somethin' would of slipped when it come to the trial. It would of be'n their word agin ourn. An' he would of had a whole roundup to swear him an alibi—where'd I be'n after they turned him loose?"

"We'll get them with the goods this time," said McLaughlin. "They'll start brandin' in the mornin', an' we'll let 'em go till they've got a bunch finished, an' close in on 'em. I want to make the sneak so when the showdown comes we'll have every man of 'em covered with a rifle. They ain't no one fool enough to make a gun play in the face of a rifle, an' I'd sooner no one got hurt."

Breakfast the following morning was eaten in silence, the horses saddled, and in silence, the little band of horsemen followed Mike Campbell who led them up a winding coulee toward the eastern edge of the bad lands. There was no wind, and the sun shone brightly. Gradually the monotonous barrens of disintegrating black and red rock gave place to stretches of alkali soil. Patches of sage, prickly pear, and buffalo grass indicated that they were drawing near to the place where the bad lands and the cattle range merged. The coulee grew steadily shallower. Its

walls gave place to slanting banks, and at length Mike Campbell halted and swung to the ground.

"We got to leave the horses here," he explained, "An' make our sneak a-foot. The corral is only a quarter of a mile, straight ahead an' the lookout's on that big red rock pinnacle to the right. I caught a whiff of the brandin' a minute ago, so we better sail in an' finish the job."

McLaughlin stepped forward: "All right, boys. You all understand what we're up against. No gun play unless it's necessary. If we can crawl clean to the corral fence, so much the better. I'll cover Harmon. Hall will handle Alex. Campbell will cover Milk River, an' Tex will look after Kid Owens. Samuels, you make your sneak on the lookout, an' that will leave Morgan to line 'em up, an' collect their artillery. We'll all stick close together so if there is any shootin' we won't be pluggin' each other through the sage. You all savvy?"

Each man nodded his understanding of the orders, and Tex looked dolefully at his boots. "This here travelin' afoot ain't what it's cracked up to be."

The sheriff grinned; and stepping to his saddle,

unrolled the slicker from its place behind the cantle: "I mistrusted you boys mightn't be figurin' on any foot work, so I brought these." He tossed a half dozen pairs of beaded moccasins onto the ground. "Run acrost an Injun peddlin' 'em in Lloyd," he explained.

"For a sheriff, you've got oncommon sense, Mac," laughed Tex, and seating himself on the ground pulled off his boots. The others followed his example, and soon all were ready for the trail. "Look out for prickly pears," cautioned McLaughlin, "An' be sure an' keep the brush between you an' that pinnacle. If that lookout should spot us, it would be all off. We could never get back to the horses before they'd got plumb out of the country."

Very slowly and carefully the men made their way through the tall sage brush. Now and then it was necessary to crawl on hands and knees across spaces where the sage was low, but for the most part, they walked erect, their soft moccasins making no sound on the grey alkali soil. The smell and the sounds of the branding were in the air. The acrid smell of sage smoke blended with the odor of burned hair and hide, and the bawling

of calves was punctuated now and then by the voices of men. Once a burst of laughter rang out. Campbell halted suddenly, and dropping to their hands and knees, the others crawled forward and peered through the sage. Twenty yards away was what seemed to be a solid barrier of sage brush, and from behind this barrier, issued the sounds of the branding.

"Where's the gate?" whispered McLaughlin.

Campbell shook his head: "Never was clost enough to see. They built a wire corral an' wove brush into it. You couldn't see it, if you didn't know it was there."

"We've got to crawl up an' shove our guns through it," McLaughlin whispered. "We can't reach over the top. Come on!"

Silently they crept forward, and a moment later the muzzles of four rifles were thrust through four apertures in the sage brush that was loosely woven between the wires of the fence. Connie, service revolver in hand, looked into the corral through an aperture close beside McLaughlin. So intent were the men upon their work that not one of them was aware of the fact that he was covered by a rifle. What the boy saw was a small fire tended by Alex

McLaurie. Harmon and Milk River were holding down a calf while Kid Owens applied the red hot branding iron to its side. A puff of ill-smelling smoke from the burning hair and hide rose into the air to the accompaniment of a bellow of pain from the calf. The Kid, and Harmon straightened up, and Milk River slackened his rope which the calf kicked from his hind legs as he scrambled to his feet and rejoined the herd that crowded the opposite side of the corral.

The voice of McLaughlin cut sharply: "Stick 'em up!"

The eyes of the four men in the corral flew to the fence where four rifle barrels protruded into the corral. Harmon's face was ghastly pale as he elevated both hands high above his head. Alex McLaurie's mouth worked nervously, and Connie noticed that the hands he held upward trembled violently. Milk River Bill's hands were up, too, and his eyes wandered from the row of rifle muzzles to rest on the figure of Kid Owens who stood grinning, with his thumbs hooked into the belt of his chaps. "Up with 'em, Kid!" The voice of Tex sounded harsh: "I'm tendin' to your case. No monkey work. I know all about the gun in yer

shirt. Reach up, now, or I'll have to plug you!"

"Oh, it's you, is it?" sneered the Kid, as he raised his hands slowly. "You got the drop on me this time, but you wait!"

"Find the gate," said McLaughlin to Connie, "an' go in an' take their guns."

A moment later the boy entered the corral, closing the gate behind him, and walking straight to Kid Owens, thrust his hand into his shirt front, and drew out a gun. Lifting the other gun from the Kid's holster, he moved on to Harmon, taking care to pass behind the Kid, so as not to obstruct Tex's aim for so much as a second. One after another he relieved the men of their weapons, and lined them up beside the Kid. Tossing the five revolvers over the fence, he covered the unarmed men with his own gun. "Come on in!" he called to the rifle men, and a moment later all four entered the corral.

Still sneering Kid Owens addressed Tex "So you're to blame fer this, eh? I s'pose you'll be foreman of the Round Seven, now. I hope you like the job. I hope you like it good enough so's you'll hang onto it till they turn me loose agin. It won't be so long—even if they git me to Deer

Lodge, which I'm doubtin', unless McLaughlin's got more brains than he looks like he has. Two to twenty years fer rustlin' an' I'll draw a light one, bein' my first offense, an' only a helper at that. Prob'ly about three years, an' three months a year off fer good behavior. That ain't so long—an when I git out the first thing I'll do will be to ride down here an' git you! An' you, too!" he cried, turning to Campbell. "What you hornin' in on this fer? We ain't branded none of your calves. I ain't blaim' Hall an' the shuriff, it's their business to go after rustlers. An' I ain't blamin' the big boss, cause they're his calves. But, you two dirty pups! I'll make you hunt your holes a couple of years from now."

"Shut up!" commanded McLaughlin, "You've just about spoke your piece. You ain't helpin' your case none, by shootin' off yer mouth. Stick yer hands behind yer back, now while I slip these bracelets on."

"Chain mine in front. I want to roll a cigareet."

"Who's doin' this?" snapped the sheriff, as he handcuffed the Kid's wrists behind him. The others submitted without a word, McLaurie

trembling so that the chains rattled on the handcuffs.

"What's the matter, Bob, you look like you'd heard bad news?" grinned the irrepressible Kid. "Look at all the time you'll git off fer good behavior. Let's see, three months a year fer twenty years, why that's five whole years. Gee, if I had that much time off, the State would be owin' me two or three years."

"B-but, that l-leaves fif-fifteen years," stammered Harmon, hopelessly, his voice husky with terror.

"They never will turn me, loose," blubbered McLaurie, "I done time onct before."

"You won't have to worry about a job, then," laughed the Kid. "Me—when they turn me loose, I'll give 'em somethin' to outlaw me for!" He glanced meaningly at Tex, who finished rolling a cigarette, and thrust the end into the Kid's mouth.

"You talk like a fool," he said, quietly, holding a match to the cigarette, "But, I'll be here when you want me."

The stock inspector who had been walking through the herd of calves joined the others:

"Close to a hundred head," he reported, "an' about twenty of 'em branded. That left handed iron ain't so bad, Harmon. It makes a pretty good Heart Bar." He produced a notebook and pencil from his pocket, and started for the calves again. "About three of you fellows come with me," he said. Connie, Campbell and the sheriff followed him, leaving Tex to guard the prisoners. Hall made several notes in his book, and pointed to a calf. "See that critter they branded? He's got two white legs, an' half his face is white, an' a white saddle acrost his withers." The three nodded, and Hall passed to another calf whose markings he recorded, and called the attention of the three to them. One after another he recorded every branded calf in the herd.

"What you doin' that fer?" asked Kid Owens, querilously, as the four concluded the work.

Hall grinned: "Oh, that's fer your special benefit, Kid," he said. "You think you're a bad actor—an' you would be if you was to be turned loose about the time you figure on. But you won't be. You're pretty smart about dopin' out how long a stretch you'd draw, an' when they'd let you go. You think you're a wise guy, but you

ain't wise—not a little bit. Yer runnin' off at the head, makin' cracks about comin' back onto this range an' gittin' some folks has cost you somewheres around forty years in the pen."

"What do you mean?" the question snapped out without the accompanying sneer. Plainly the stock inspector's strange actions, and his words had caused the Kid a sudden uneasiness.

"I mean that when it comes to your case, we'll just make each one of those calves a separate offense. You'll draw from three to five years for each one of 'em—an' there's just twenty."

"You can't do it!" shrilled the Kid, a sudden panic taking possession of him. He started to his feet, his face livid. "You can't do that!"

"Can't we?" sneered Hall, "You wait an' see. You an' Harmon will be gittin' out about the same time—an' you'll both be old men. By that time the cattle range will be gone, an' there'll be a string of farms up an' down Eagle. Harmon, here, we'll just bunch his in two lots—the ones he branded this year, an' the ones he's branded before. He'll get about twenty years apiece. Hello! Here comes Samuels with the lookout!"

The nester appeared at the gate of the corral, a

dejected looking man preceding him, hands elevated above his head. A moment later the hand cuffs snapped about his wrists, and he took his place beside the others.

McLaughlin spoke to Tex: "You skip back an' get your brandin' iron, an' we'll get busy an' vent these critters, an' rebrand 'em an' turn 'em loose. Then some one better cross the river an' see what you can find over on Harmon's ranch. I'll deputize Campbell an' Samuels to help me get these birds down to Benton. The Grand Jury's settin' now, an' I want to get this case before 'em."

Tex returned with the horses, and loosening the iron from his saddle built up the fire and thrust it in. The venting and branding occupied two or three hours, and when it was finished the corral gates were opened and the calves turned out on the range.

The horses of the five prisoners were tied together, and the manacled men secured by tying their ankles beneath the horse's belly.

As they were about to start, Kid Owens called to the inspector: "Say, Hall, I was only kiddin', about comin' back here an' gettin' Tex an' Campbell—honest I was."

"Tell that to the pardon board," retorted the inspector. "You made your crack—now, don't welch on it. An' what's more you're lyin' when you say you was only kiddin'. You've got a bad eye, an' a bad heart, an' I'm goin' to see that you get put where you can't harm no one. Montana's had enough of your kind. The quicker we git shut of varmints like you, the quicker we'll have a peaceable an' law-abidin' State. Trouble with you is, you was born too late. Montana's got tired of the rough stuff. I've knocked around the range from cow punchin' up to the job I've got, for goin' on twenty years, an' I know that ninety-nine out of every hundred of the boys on the range is law-abidin' an' peaceful—an' always was. It's the hundredth man—like you, that's always made the trouble—an' the boobs back east hear about it, an' think we're all like that. They're so blamed ignorant that they can't see that there's more rough stuff pulled in any one of their big cities every year than has ever be'n pulled in the west from the time the first cow outfit started. But, believe me the wild west ain't goin' to git no free advertisin' out of you for quite a spell to come. So long. See you at the trial."

CHAPTER XIV

THE "GREENNESS" OF CONNIE MORGAN

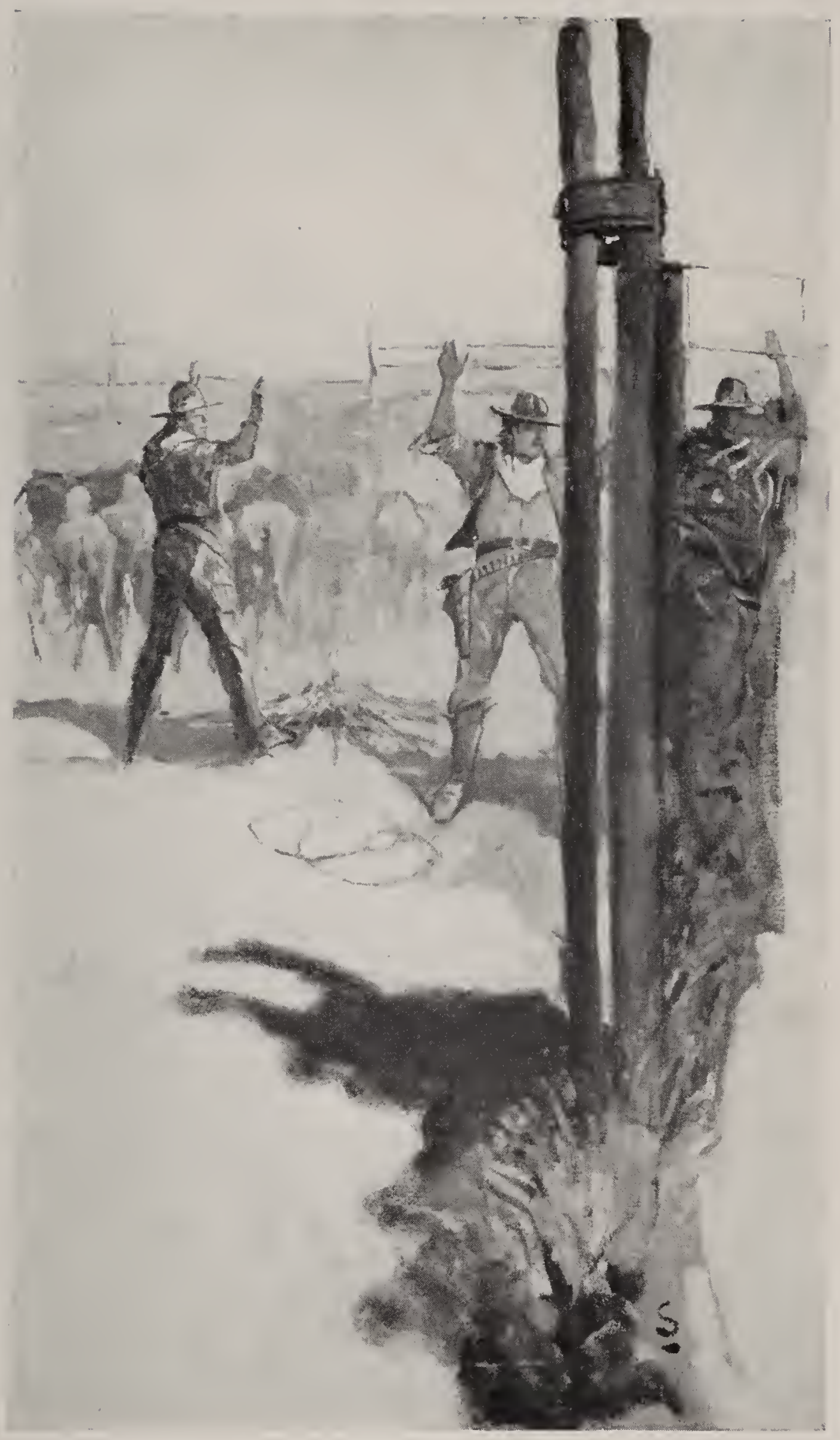
SENDING Tex to take charge of the round-up, Connie accompanied Hall to the Missouri where they ferried the horses across on the clumsy flat-float that Harmon used to transport his stolen stock to the other side. For three days the two rode the range south of the big river, where the stock inspector, an expert with the rope, caught, threw, and examined the brands of dozens of Heart Bar cattle.

"Harmon was playin' it high wide, an' han'some," he said, as toward the evening of the third day they drew near the home ranch of the big TN outfit. "Not only brandin' calves with his left handed brandin' iron, but finishin' out your brand into a Heart Bar on old stuff with a runnin' iron. I ain't found a single one of the Heart Bars yet that ain't be'n worked. He's

stole everything he owns. Best way out of it for you is to hire the TN round-up to gather all the Heart Bar stuff an' hold it for you. It'll cost you twice as much if you send your own outfit over here an' they wouldn't know the range as well, either. I know Bob Dye, the foreman, an' I'll give him the order. He wouldn't have no right to pick up Heart Bar stuff on your say-so, without authority from me. It'll only cost you a dollar-an'-a-half a head, an' they'll hold 'em inside their fences till you send for 'em. Then I'll fix it so you can vent an' re-brand right there. Then you can get 'em back acrost the river an' turn 'em loose on their own range without trailin' 'em clean back to your home ranch."

The two passed the night at the TN, and the business concluded, headed northward, crossed the river at Clagett, and pushed on to the Round Seven ranch, where after a night's rest the stock inspector bid the boy good bye and went on to look into another case that would take him over into the Highwoods.

The following morning Connie saddled his horse, and rode down to the south pasture where he pulled up beside the stack where the man who



Harmon's face was ghastly pale as he elevated both hands high above his head

called himself Wadell was loading hay onto his wagon.

"So you're the new owner of the Round Seven, eh?" asked the man, after he had acknowledged Connie's greeting. "Quite a job you've tackled, not to be no older'n what you be, an' green to boot."

"Yes, quite a job."

"How'd you like it, fur's you've got?"

"Fine. It won't be long, now, before I'll have a good outfit here."

"That there foreman of yourn, Bob Harmon, he's onto all the wrinkles of the cow business."

Evidently the news of Harmon's arrest had not reached Eagle Creek. "He sure is," agreed the boy, heartily, "And there's quite a lot of wrinkles that need smoothing out."

The man shot him a shifty glance: "Meanin'?"

"Well, for one thing, meaning that there are too many little oufits along the creeks to suit me."

The man grinned: "That's what ails the Round Seven," he agreed. "The water's gitten fenced in on you." He leaned on his pitchfork and winked knowingly: "Grey's alfalfy's up

about a foot high, a'ready," he confided, "An' the blame fool's gone to work an' built up that west fence of his'n agin."

"Yes, what of it?"

"Why, don't you know the game Bob worked on him last year? He run a lot of hungry an thirsty steers up agin that fence, an' left 'em. It didn't take 'em long to lay the fence flat an' clean up the alfalfy. You better slip the word to Bob to have his steers handy. 'Cause I figger Grey thinks he'll slip one over on you by cuttin' early this year. Grey, he's pretty clost to the edge. Ruin his hay on him this year, an' you got him. That'll be one little outfit out of the way."

"Yes," answered the boy, "That'll be one. And, you're the next."

"That's right," grinned the man, "I'm the next. It ain't goin' to be no trouble fer us to deal. I don't aim to hold you up, like some would. All I want is a reasonable price fer my claim."

"What do you figure a reasonable price?"

"Well—seein' how my land lays, up an' down the crick, it ort to be worth six thousan' dollars—an' that's jest about givin' it away."

"That includes everything—sheep, and all?"

The man laughed uproariously: "Quit yer jokin'! Sheep an' all! There's two thousan' wethers in that band, worth anyhow seven dollars a head right where they're at. Say, you was jokin', wasn't you. You ain't as green as all that?"

"Pretty green, I guess," smiled the boy. "So that just includes the land? Any improvements?"

"Nothin', what you might call improvements, except a two-wire fence."

"How long have you lived there?"

"Not so very long."

"How long?"

"I moved on early this spring."

"Where are your claim papers?"

"Down to the tent. I ain't had time to even put up a shack."

"Let's go down and look them over."

"All right. Wait till I finish out this load. It won't take but a few more forkfuls."

Connie followed as the man drove to the sheep corral where he climbed off the hay load. Dismounting the boy followed him into the tent, where seating himself on a box beside a rude table, Wadell fumbled in his war bag. Straightening up, he tossed a thick official envelope upon the

table, and the boy examined its contents. After a while he looked up. "How much did it cost you to file?" he asked.

"Sixteen dollars an' a half, fer the homestead, an' forty fer the desert, an' forty fer the wife's desert."

"Where is your wife?"

"She ain't come on, yet. She's visitin' down to her folks on the Musselshell."

"That's ninety-six dollars and a half," said the boy. "You've been here say three months, and you want six thousand? Pretty good profit, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. There's the fencin'. An' besides it ain't what the land's worth now, it's what it will be. It's worth that much to you, jest to hold the water."

"What's the fence worth?"

"Well, there's a couple hundred dollars worth of wire, an' puttin' it up, not to say nothin' about the posts, an' the haulin'."

"Where did you get the wire, and who hauled it, and who built your fence?"

The man hesitated a moment before replying: "Where d'you s'pose I got it? Picked it offen trees?"

"I'm not here to suppose. I'm here to find out, and I'm going to find out, so you might as well tell me. I want to know where you got that wire, and who built your fence, and whether or not it is paid for?"

For a space of seconds the man's glance held on the steady grey eyes of the boy, then it wavered, and he smiled: "Why, no—that is, it ain't exactly paid fer, yet. I bought it offen Harmon. You see the Round Seven had the wire on hand, an' nowheres to use it, an' I agreed to take it. It wasn't no use leavin' that money tied up in wire that wasn't bein' used. I aim to pay fer it out of my wool money."

"Who built the fence?" persisted the boy.

"Why the Round Seven ranch hands built it. The fore part of the winter they didn't have nothin' to do around the ranch, so Harmon, wantin' to be neighborly, loaned 'em to me."

"And the posts?"

"I got them offen Harmon, too."

"And now about the hay," continued the boy. "You've been feeding Round Seven hay, haven't you?"

"Yes, some. I aim to pay that out of my wool

money, too. That is, onless we make a dicker fer the claims. In which case you kin take it out when you pay me."

Connie nodded: "I see. The way it stands, your land is fenced with Round Seven posts and wire, built by Round Seven labor, and you're feeding Round Seven hay, and hauling it with a Round Seven team and wagon. Is that about right?"

"Yes, I rent the team an' wagon off Harmon."

The boy was silent for so long that the man shuffled about impatiently. At last he spoke: "Well, what do you say? It's dirt cheap fer you at six thousan'? I kin git my sheep offen here any time—today, if you say so—that is if you come acrost with the mazuma."

Connie laughed: "Six thousand dollars is quite a lot of money for a boy of my size to be carrying around in his pocket. And besides, I'm pretty green, as you said. The fact is, I'm so green at this business that I don't even know whether these papers are correct, or not. I haven't had much business experience. There were some logs once up in Minnesota that a man tired to beat me out of. And another time I paid ten cents for a sack of

peanuts on a train, and I found out afterwards that they were only worth five cents. So I'm naturally cautious in dealing with strangers."

"Oh, that's all right," the man hastened to assure, "But this here case is different. I ain't no stranger. We're neighbors, an' if you got any doubts about me, ask Harmon. He's know'd me fer years. He'll tell you I'm all right."

"That's the trouble," answered the boy, a perplexed frown wrinkling his brow, "I can't ask Harmon."

"Why not? It ain't fur out to where the roundup's at."

"No, but, you see, Harmon isn't with the roundup any more."

"Where is he at?" the man shot a keen glance into the boy's immobile face.

"Why, he's down at Benton, in jail."

"In jail!" The words leaped from the man's lips. "What d'you mean—in jail?"

"That's just what I mean. You see, I'm green at this business, and I wondered why he was changing Round Seven calves into Heart Bar calves, so I sent for the sheriff and the stock inspector to ask them about it, and we all went

down the other side of the bad lands where they had a corral built in the sage brush, and watched them change some brands, and then the sheriff took Harmon down to Benton with him, and Kid Owens, and Alex McLaurie, and Milk River, and another man. It seems that there is something wrong about it, somewhere." The man was staring wide-eyed, and Connie noticed that his face had paled perceptibly. He continued in an even voice: "And so you see I can't ask Harmon about you, but that'll be all right, because when I found out that your name is Curry, and not Wadell, and that you already had one claim over on Shonkin, I wondered if that was all right. I'm so green that I thought I'd just make sure, so I sent for the United States deputy marshall. He'll be down here some time today, and then we'll all three look over the papers together, and if they're all right, I'll buy the claims. You see, this being a Government proposition, the sheriff couldn't help me out on it——" The boy's words were drowned in a yell of rage, as the man sprang forward and struck clumsily across the table with his fist. The boy stepped lightly to his feet, and the force of the blow that did not land sent Wadell

sprawling across the table top. With a roar he regained his feet, and froze in his tracks as he found himself staring into the muzzle of the boy's service revolver. His fists unclenched slowly, and every particle of color left his face. His shoulders sagged perceptibly, and the flash of rage in his eyes faded into that peculiar hang-dog look that is the look of a beaten man. His lips moved, and he moistened them with the tip of his tongue: "Wha—what you mean—green?" he managed to stammer, "Who be you?"

"I'm Connie Morgan," answered the boy, in the same half-diffident tone he had employed all through the conversation. "I'm green, but I'm down here trying to learn the cattle business. There's more to it than I thought, but if I work hard, I guess I can learn it."

"I'll say so," mumbled the man. "I don't git you. You set there an' talk like a fool, an yet 'fore yer here two months you've got next to about all the dirty work that was goin' on. I kind of savvy you, at that. The fool way of talkin' is only actin'. I didn't know till I jest studied it out. It's the way you draw'd yer gun. They ain't no man livin' that's slow-headed like you let on, that

could dodge a blow, an' git onto his feet, an' cover a man with a gun all in one move. But, say, don't set the Gov'ment onto me. I was tryin' to cheat you, all right. But it was Harmon's doin's. He got me to come over here, an' pertend to take up the claim. Them papers is forged. When he found out that Wilson had sold out to another Alasky man, he figgered on cleanin' up big, count of him gittin' away with it with Wilson. Him an' I throw'd in an' bought that band of wethers, paid nine thousan' dollars fer 'em. We aimed to run 'em on your range, an' take the clip, an' fat 'em on your hay, an' sell 'em. We'd of made about three thousan' on the deal, an' besides we'd of gouged you out of the six thousan' fer the land."

"You must have thought I was green," commented the boy.

"Well, Harmon he pulled it jest as raw as that on Wilson, an' got away with it, so he figgered all Alasky men was easy. Now, I've give it to you straight, let me git away from here before that there marshal comes. I'll go straight, from now on—honest I will. This is the first time I ever broke the law, an' I've got a bellyfull of it. I've got me a little place over on Shonkin where I kin

make a livin', if I'm let alone. You kin keep the sheep. Only loan me a saddle horse to git away on, an' don't set the Gov'ment on me."

For a long time the boy was silent, as he watched a tiny gleam of hope grow in the other's eyes. He thrust the revolver into its holster, and reached for the claim papers, which he carefully folded, slipped into the envelope, and thrust into his pocket. "I think, Curry, I'll give you a chance," he said, slowly. "I'll just keep these papers. I won't use them unless you forget to run straight. About the sheep, now. I'll get Harmon's share by process of law. Your own share you can keep. Of course you'll have to stand your share of the hay expense, and your share of the labor for building that fence, and for tearing it down to get it off the open range——"

The flicker of a smile twisted the man's lips. "If you could use the fence where it's at, it would save you quite a bit," he said. "It's only a two-wire one, but a couple more wires would make it cattle proof."

"But—I've got no right to fence the range!'

"Well—this here piece ain't exactly open range. It belongs to the Round Seven already. Harmon

said you wouldn't never know the difference. We wouldn't of dasted to fence open range where we would of had to show them forged papers to the first claim inspector that come along."

"But, about these sheep. You'll have to look after them till we can dispose of them. I don't want them where they are. Can't you trail them off someplace and herd them?"

"Young man," said the sheep man, solemnly. "I kin trail them sheep clean down into Mexico an' herd 'em indeffinate, if you say so. I'll do anything you say to do. I feel different in here, a'ready," he placed his hand on his chest, "I wasn't borned to be no crook. An' I ain't felt right good sence I got into it."

CHAPTER XV

I. W. W.

THE calf round-up was over. The Heart Bar cattle had been rebranded with the Round Seven brand and turned onto their own range north of the Missouri River, and Tex, with a half dozen riders who had been retained, was out on the range gathering a train load of three-year-old steers and turning them onto the Indian Reservation where they would "finish off" for fall shipment to Chicago, to much better advantage than on the open range.

Connie remained at the Round Seven home ranch where haying was in full swing. Each day found him in the hay fields where the crews under the direction of Tombstone and Canary were harvesting the crop of winter feed. To the boy whose experience had been for the most part in the far north, there was a certain fascination in seeing the tall grass laid flat to the whine of the mowers.

There was fascination, also, in the scent of the sun-dried hay that was rolled into long windrows by the rakes, and whipped into cocks by the forks of the hay crew, and in watching the huge stacks grow, as load after load was swung aloft by the big boom of the stackers.

One evening as the boy sat on the porch of the log ranch house with his eyes on the far horizon where the square head of Sugar Loaf Butte stood out distinctly in the afterglow, Tombstone, doleful of countenance, slowly chewing at the end of a stalk of hay that dangled from the corner of his mouth, ambled around the corner of the house and seated himself on the top step. For a full minute he sat there chewing his piece of hay, his eyes fixed sombrely upon the ground. Connie was the first to speak:

"How are things coming, Tombstone?" he asked.

The man shoved his Stetson toward the back of his head, shifted the straw to the opposite corner of his mouth, and spat with deliberation and accuracy upon a sun dried chip. "Things looks bad. Tol'able bad, a man could say." He surveyed the result of his shot at the chip with approval, and relapsed into silence.

"Why, what's the matter? Everything seemed to be going fine this afternoon."

"We got a lot of hay down. One field of blue j'int layin' flat. A lot of wild hay up the west coulee raked, an' that alfalfy down in the medder, all cocked up."

"What's the matter with that?" The boy's eyes swept the sky that had been cloudless for weeks. "You're not looking for rain, are you?"

Tombstone submitted the heavens to a minute scrutiny. "You can't never tell," he opined, with a wag of the head, "I've saw it rain before now, an' I've saw it not. If it hauls off an' rains things will be worst an' worst, which they're bad enough as they be."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, some of the hands has quit."

"Quit! What did they quit for?"

"They want more money. They claim it's too hot, an' they won't work for no forty dollars a month."

"Isn't it always hot at haying time?"

"Sure, it's hot. It ain't the hot. That there's jist a excuse fer to have somethin' to kick about. They think they've got you where they kin gouge

five dollars more on the month out of you. This here is a heavy hay year, an' all the outfits has hired all the men they is, an' they figger you can't git no more if they quit."

"Have they all quit?"

"Naw. Only one gang. Them ones that's in the bunk house. They's two or three of 'em that claims they're I. Ws., whatever that is, an' they've talked around amongst the rest, an' made speeches nights, ontil they've got the hull gang onsatisfied with the work an' the wages, an' everything else. Besides which they know you're jest a young feller. I wisht Tex was here. Mebbe me or Canary could find him in a day's ride, or so."

"I guess we won't bother Tex," Connie replied. "He ought to be pulling in most any time, now. But even if he should be out a few days longer, I think we can handle this gang. I ran across the I. W. Ws. once up in a log camp in Minnesota, and I know something of their tricks. You stay here and I'll go down to the bunk house and have a talk with 'em. I was looking for Tex and the boys in this evening. If they come before I get back, tell them not to show up around the bunk house. Wherever there are I. W. Ws, there's apt to be

trouble, and if they want to start anything, it's just as well not to let them know how strong we are."

"I do'no," said Tombstone, doubtfully, "I don't b'lieve talkin' will do no good. An' if you agree to give 'em a five dollar raise, the other gang'll want it, too. An' if you don't, the heft of 'em'll quit, an' we'll be short handed an' lose a lot of hay, or if they don't quit they'll be wantin' another five dollar raise in a week's time. Things looks bad, boss, I'm a-tellin'—mighty bad."

Connie laughed: "Cheer up, Tombstone! Things generally work out all right. What we've got to do is use our heads. I'll know more about it when I come back."

"They's a lot of times things don't work out," forboded Tombstone, lugubriously: "Lots of hay has be'n lost 'cause outfits was short-handed. Outfits has busted, an' men has died before now, because things didn't work out right. If yer luck's runnin' porely, it ain't no use to try to buck it. Even if only half them fellers quits, we're crippled so we lose a lot of hay."

On the way to the bunk house Connie grinned to himself: "Poor Tombstone," he muttered, "It

must be awful to always look on the dark side of things. The trouble is with him, he's never learned to live."

Twilight was deepening, and as the boy approached the bunk house he could see by the yellow glow of the bracket lamps that the men had sought shelter from the mosquitoes behind the closed screens. The sound of a voice reached his ears. Evidently one of their number was haranguing them in a sort of set speech. Fragments of the man's remarks reached his ears as he drew near the door: "Capital grinds labor in under its heel. Bosses an' slaves—that's what this country's made up of. Us pore fellers toilin' an' sweatin' out there in the sun all day is the slaves, an' the ranch owners is the bosses. An' what do we git out of it? Forty stinkin' dollars a month! The price of one steer! Or two ton of hay! An' how many steers has this outfit got? An' how many ton of hay? Thousands of 'em! But, the time's comin' when things will be changed. Labor's got to organize. Capital can't exist without us. We've got the bosses by the throat, an' we don't know enough to squeeze down an' choke 'em. Right now, we've got the chanct to squeeze down an' git a little of

what's comin' to us—" Connie opened the door and entered the bunk house. A sharp featured man, with narrow shoulders, and a blue cotton shirt open at the throat, stood at one end of the room. Two others were seated beside him, and the rest of the men lounged on chairs and bunks. Connie seated himself in a chair and deliberately tilted its back against the wall. The narrow shouldered man stared at him for a moment, shuffled uneasily upon his feet, glanced over the faces of the others, and sat down abruptly between his two companions, where he mopped his sweat-beaded forehead with the sleeve of his blue cotton shirt.

"Go on," urged Connie, smiling toward the man. "Don't mind me. Go on with your speech. I'd like to hear it."

The man scowled, wriggled, and shot an appealing look toward the man on his left, a large, low-browed man with a month's growth of beard. The big man answered the boy's invitation without rising from his chair: "What we got to say, ain't fer you to listen to. All you've got to know is that you've got to pay us five dollars more on the month, or we'll quit."

"Why should I pay five dollars more a month? You agreed to work for forty dollars, didn't you? None of the other outfits are paying more than forty."

"That don't make no difference one way or another. The p'int is, we've got you where you'll pay the five, or you'll lose more hay than what the raise would come to. We use our head, we do. You're up agin organization, young feller, an' organized labor is goin' to show the bosses where to head in at. Time ain't so fur off when the I. W. W.'ll make the prices, an' you bosses'll pay 'em, same as you're goin' to come acrost, now."

"Are you all I. W. Ws?" asked the boy glancing about the room. He noted that the eyes of most of the men lowered before his glance, and the man with the stubby beard answered. "No—only us three here is I. W. Ws., now—but the rest of 'em will be when they see how easy it is to git their rights."

"There are a few points I'd like to talk over," replied the boy. "You say that the fact that you agreed to work for forty dollars don't make any difference. You expect these men to join your organization, and the first thing you show them

is that the organization welches on a bargain." The boy turned to the others who had remained silent listeners: "How do you boys feel about it?" he asked, abruptly. "You've all worked in the hay fields before. What's the trouble?" he paused for a moment, but no one answered, and he continued: "Don't your sleeping quarters suit you? Or, is it the grub? Or the hours? I want to find out where the trouble is. Tombstone told me someone said it was the hot weather. But, if you did quit, it would be just as hot the next place you worked, and the wages would be the same." Once more the boy paused and ignoring the three I. W. Ws., allowed his glance to travel over the faces of the others. No one volunteered an answer and he pointed his finger at a large, roll-sleeved man whose arms were tanned to the color of old leather. "You, there—with the pipe—you tell me what the trouble is, and we'll talk it over."

The eyes of all centered upon the man, who finding himself singled out, hunched forward in his chair and removed the pipe from his mouth: "Talkin' about me, personal, they ain't no trouble. I've be'n hayin' fer fifteen year, not only around here, but in other places, an' other states, an' they

ain't be'n a onct that I was better set than what I be right here. The bunk house is better'n most places they sleep you, an' the grub's jest as good as any I ever et, an' a heap better'n the general run, an' the hours is the shortest I ever seen called a day in hayin' time. I've worked fer outfits that figgered a day started in the grey of the mornin' an' quit when it was too dark to see, an' most outfits call a day from sunrise till sundown, which this time of year is plenty long, but with this here outfit the sun's shinin' when we go to the fields, an' it's still shinin' when we come out of 'em. When a boss or a coffee-cooler comes out like a man an' wants to know where the trouble is, the way I figger it, he's got a right to be told. The trouble with this here gang is settin' right over there in them three chairs." He indicated with his pipe stem the three I. W. Ws., and settling back in his chair, replaced the pipe in his mouth and spoke slowly between puffs. "Talkin' about me, I'm goin' to stay where I'm at. Personal, I'm an American, an' I don't need no Roosian Kike, er Dago, er whatever them birds is, to tell me when I'm settin' purty. I've set an' listened to their bluffin', an' their talk about their lodge er whatever

it is, till it looks to me like if Congress would go to work an' turn everyone loose that's locked up in every jail an' pen in America, an' fill up the jails an' the pens with these here I. W. Ws., the general average of folks runnin' loose would be consid'able better'n what it is now."

Hardly were the words out of the man's mouth than, with a snarl of hate, the big, low browed man who had acted as spokesman for the I. W. Ws., leaped to his feet, and with chair swung aloft rushed at the man with the pipe, who had no time to defend himself, or even to rise from his chair. Quick as a flash, Connie, who was seated between the two, and a little to one side, thrust out his foot, and the next instant both he and the big ruffian crashed to the floor. Pandemonium broke loose in the bunk house. Before the big I. W. W. could regain his feet, the man with the pipe was upon him. Connie scrambled to his hands and knees only to be knocked flat the next moment by a chair wielded by the narrow shouldered I. W. W. The rungs of the chair struck the boy fairly upon the back of the head, and for a moment the room turned black. Sounds were all about him; the quick breathing of men, the thud of blows, and

the hoarse grunts that followed the thuds. Again he scrambled to his hands and knees. The floor seemed to be swaying and rocking beneath him, and a wave of nausea and dizziness swept over him. Two men, grip-locked in each other's arms tripped over him, and as Connie squirmed and wriggled from beneath them he saw the narrow shouldered man snatch up the leg of a broken chair and sneak forward, his eyes fixed upon the head of the man with the pipe whose back was toward him, and who was exchanging blow for blow with the big man who had started the row.

Unarmed as he was, Connie did not hesitate a second. His brain cleared, and struggling to his feet he launched himself upon the back of the narrow shouldered man just as he raised his club to strike. Connie's right arm shot over the man's right shoulder, and instantly his fore-arm tightened with a vise-like grip under the man's chin, at the same moment his right knee bored into the small of the man's back. With a startled gurgle the man gave backward, the chair-leg flew out of his hand and knocked the chimney from one of the bracket lamps causing it to flare smokily. The two crashed to the floor with Connie on top. A mighty

surge of rage seized the boy as he realized that beneath him lay the man who had dealt him the cowardly blow from behind, and who was stopped in the act of dealing another cowardly blow from behind. The man's hand closed on another chair leg as Connie's fingers gripped his throat, and he flattened himself against the man's body as the weapon swept harmlessly above him. Putting every ounce of strength into his grip, the boy squeezed the man's wind pipe, and a wild sense of elation swept over him as he felt the yielding flesh give beneath his fingers. The man struggled furiously, and doggedly Connie maintained his grip, pumping up and down with all his strength, so that the back of the man's head audibly battered the floor. The man's legs and arms thrashed and writhed as he vainly sought to break the vice-like grip at his throat. Finally his struggles grew weaker, and suddenly ceased, as did the gurgling sounds that had been forced from between his lips. The boy relaxed his grip as he glanced into the face of the man whose mouth had sagged open, and whose eyes had rolled back until only the whites were visible, showing in startling contrast to the fast purpling skin of his cheeks and forehead.

The sounds of struggle dwindled and ceased. Connie regained his feet with the aid of the overturned table, and glanced about him. Three men sat astride of three others upon the floor. The big ruffian who had started the fight cowered upon his knees, with his face buried in the blankets of a bunk, and his arms protecting his head, while the man with the pipe stood over him with doubled fists. The narrow-shouldered man's chest began to heave, and his lips writhed, as his breathing apparatus began to function once more. The third I. W. W. lay peacefully slumbering a few feet distant, with a big blue lump on his forehead where a chair leg had met him head-on.

The man with the pipe turned his gaze on the boy. One deeply purpled eye had swelled shut, but the man's swollen lips grinned, and his good eye winked as he indicated the three men who were held to the floor: "Say, boss, looks like this here lodge had nishiated three new members, but they's six of us that they didn't nishiate—not what you'd notice. Which it means that when it come to a show-down Ameriky's still on top."

Connie laughed: "You bet she's still on top!" he agreed. "And now, if you boys will stay here

and keep an eye on these fellows till I come back we'll give 'em their time and get them off the ranch."

"Leave 'em to us, boss," replied the man, searching about the floor for his pipe. "They won't start nothin' we can't stop."

CHAPTER XVI

FIRE

TOMBSTONE was waiting on the steps of the porch. "D'you have any luck?" he asked.

"Pretty good luck," grinned the boy. "We argued the thing out, and only half of 'em decided to quit, the three I. W. Ws., and three more. The other six will stay."

"Even if half of 'em quits, we'll be short-handed an' prob'ly lose a lot of hay," Tombstone glanced into the boy's face, and his brow puckered. "Say, boss, what's the matter? Yer shirt's all tore. You look like you be'n in a fight."

"Things did get a little lively down there for a few minutes, but they're quiet, now."

Tombstone's reply was interrupted by the sound of hoofs, and the next moment Tex and his six cowboys swept down the creek and drew up sharply in the open space before the house.

"Hello, boss," called the new foreman, as he

slipped to the ground. "Well, we finished up the job. Shoved five hundred head of steers onto the reservation, an' picked up four head of missin' saddle horses." His glance rested for a moment upon the face of Tombstone, and he grinned: "What's eatin' you? You're plumb doleful lookin'. Got a burr in under yer suspenders?"

"Huh, they's plenty trouble 'round here. Part of the hay crew's quit, an' the boss had a fight down to the bunk house, an' things looks mighty bad."

"A fight, did you say?" Tex stepped closer to Connie. "How about it, boss? It ain't over, is it?"

The boy laughed, "Yes, it's all over. You're just a few minutes too late to get in on it." Connie spent the next ten minutes in explaining the situation, concluding with the information that he was going to pay off the insurgents and get them off the ranch.

Tex looked grave. "I. W. Ws., eh?"

Connie nodded: "Yes. Know anything about 'em?"

"I know enough to know that when they can't get holt of dynamite they use fire. There must be

a lot of haystacks in the fields by now. They belong where Harmon an' his gang is. Ain't they done enough so we can haul 'em to town an' turn em over to the sheriff?"

The boy shook his head: "No—but—" his voice trailed into silence, and for some moments he stood apparently lost in thought:

"We started a setting just inside the fence up where our road joins the main trail. We must have half a stack there already."

"I wasn't thinkin' about no half a stack," replied Tex. "How about the settin's that's already finished—the ones that's got anywheres from a hundred to four hundred ton apiece in 'em?"

"And I was thinking of that half a stack," replied the boy gravely. "These I. W. Ws. are pilgrims. They wouldn't go far off the main trail in the dark."

Followed, then, a colloquy, at the end of which Tex and his riders turned and rode away into the night, and Connie and Tombstone proceeded to the bunk house.

"Holy Smoke!" exclaimed Tombstone, as he stepped into the interior. "They ain't a hull

chair left! I'll say things was lively! Charge 'em up with the chairs, boss. It's their fault they was broke."

Connie laughed: "I'll contribute the chairs to the good of the cause." He surveyed the six battered individuals who had been herded into one end of the bunk house. "Step over here, one at a time and get your money. You've worked a half a month." One by one the three I. W. Ws. slouched forward and accepted his wages while the six loyal hands stood guard, each with the leg of a broken chair held conspicuously in his hand. The three others who had thrown in with them followed, only the last man making any comment. "I don't want to quit," he whined. "I'm satisfied to keep on workin'. I'm like him," he indicated the big man with the pipe. "This job suits me, an' I want to stay. These here fellers talked me into strikin' fer more wages, but I'm gittin' enough the way it is."

"You're a little too late deciding," answered Connie, coldly. "You should have made up your mind when the fight started, like these other men did. Here's your money." The boy handed the man his wages and turned to the others. "You

fellows are going to pull out of here in about ten minutes," he ordered. "Tombstone will hitch a team to the wagon and haul you out to the trail."

"The trail!" roared the big I. W. W. "You hauled us out from town an' you'll haul us back where you got us! We know our rights. You'll haul us clean to town, or we'll have the law on you!"

"You're a fine bunch to appeal to the law," sneered the boy. "But go ahead. Your bluff is called, because once outside my gate you're going to be afoot. We're short handed here because you've made us short handed, and I haven't got a man, nor a team to spare for a trip to town. It's only sixty or seventy miles, and the walk will do you good. If you get tired just camp along the road and wait for the stage. It will be along sometime to-morrow."

"If you don't haul us, you've got to sleep us, an feed us till the stage comes, an' then pay our fare in!"

"Oh, do I?" Connie smiled, "Well, just add that to your claim for damages when you bring that law suit."

A few minutes later Tombstone pulled up at the

door with a loud "Whoa!" and Connie turned to the big man with the pipe. "Load 'em into the wagon," he ordered. "And you boys better go along to see that they don't start anything. Dump 'em off at the gate and hustle back. We've done a pretty good evening's work since supper, and I'll have the cook rustle an extra lunch."

Except for the little light of the stars, the night was dark, and very still. Beside the trail, just outside the gate of the Round Seven ranch, six disconsolate figures stood glowering into the night. During the ride to the gate no one had spoken. In the mind of each had risen a wild thought of seizing the team and wagon and driving it on to town, but one glance into the faces of the guards showed their evident willingness to use the chair legs they still held in their hands, and the thought died a-borning.

To the northward, the black mass of the Bear Paws cut a jagged line across the star-studded sky. A light puff of air from the south rustled the leaves of the cottonwoods and fanned the faces of the men, and to their ears was borne the muffled creak and rattle of the wagon returning

slowly down the creek to the ranch. The big leader of the I. W. Ws. scowled as his eyes sought the trail that vanished into the endless dark. Then, suddenly they fixed upon a rounded black shape that reared high close beside the trail. It was an unfinished stack of hay, the one they had been working on that day.

With a venomous imprecation the man pointed to the hay stack: "We'll make him wisht he'd of hauled us to town!" he growled. "They's forty ton of hay in that stack if they's a pound. We'll learn the young pup to set men afoot sixty mile from nowheres!"

The others divined his intention. The narrow-shouldered man whom Connie had choked into submission offered a protest: "What's forty ton of hay?" he sneered. "Why not make a job of it while we're about it? Might's well git hung fer a sheep as a lamb, as the sayin' goes. What's the matter with slippin' around to them south fields where the hayin's all finished? They's settin's of hay down there, four stacks to the settin', an' a hundred ton to the stack. We kin pair off, two an' two, an' burn three of them settin's to onct—that'll be twelve hundred ton gone fluie!"

"That's the idee!" seconded the third I. W. W. "Might's well do a good job while we're about it."

"Yes," sneered the big man, "An' where'd you go when you done it? They ain't none of us knows the country well enough to ever git out of them fences in the dark."

"The bad lands is south an' east," countered the narrow-shouldered man. "We could hit fer the bad lands."

"Yes, an' then what?" taunted the big man. "A-foot in the bad lands with nothin' to eat, an' nothin' to drink! If we didn't curl up an' die in two days' time, we'd be crawlin' out of there on our bellies a-beggin' 'em to come an' hang us to put us out of our misery. An' believe me, if we git caught it's a tight necktie an' a cottonwood limb fer us! No sir! I ain't agoin' to git fer off this trail! They can't see this here stack from the ranch, nohow, an' we'll have all night to git away in. They won't know it's burnt till mornin', an' by that time we'll be a long ways off. It ain't like as if the cowboys was home. They can't foller us, cause they ain't none of them hay hands kin ride a horse no more'n what we kin. An' besides they

got so much hay down that they can't afford to stop hayin' to chase us. Even if they did, we could see 'em fore they seen us, an' hide till they got past. 'Course, I wisht this here was a big settin', like them below, but losin' forty ton, with hay figgered around twenty dollars a ton will make it cost him dear fer not haulin' us to town. Come on!"

The big man started for the fence, the two I. W. Ws. followed at his heels, but the other three men held back. With a hand on the barbed wire, the big man glanced over his shoulder, then he turned and strode wrathfully back to the trail: "What's ailin' youse?" he asked, truculently, "Youse is in on this here party, same as us! Come on. We're all in the same boat."

"We don't aim to burn no hay," replied one of the men, looking the leader squarely in the eye.

"Oh, you don't, eh?" sneered the big man. "An' what do you aim to do? Didn't you say you was goin' to join up with the I. W. Ws. the first chanct you got? What do you expect to do—lay around an' let someone else do the work, an' you git the benefits of it? That don't go with us."

"An' burnin' up a man's property don't go with

us, neither," retorted the man, "I ain't no criminal."

"Oh, you ain't no criminal!" sneered the other, "An' yet you want to belong to the I. W. W.! Well, we ain't got no Sunday School section in the organization. We go after a thing to git it. If we can't git it one way, we git it another. An' we don't care how we do it. The only way fer labor to force its demands on capital is to terrorize capital into grantin' the demands." The man rattled the sentence off glibly, as a school boy speaks his "piece." It was a sentence he had memorized. "An' the way to terrorize capital is to destroy property," he continued, "An' that's what the I. W. W. is for."

"I'm glad I found out before I joined up," replied the other, "I thought it was just a—a sort of union that took in unskilled labor."

"That's jest exactly what we be! A union—only instead of foolin' around arbitratin' we believe in usin' force. Strike at capital's dollars an' you bring it wallerin' to its knees. We're a union, all right—but our idees is more radical than other unions."

"An' a blame sight too radical fer me!" ex-

claimed the man, "You go your way, an' we'll go ourn."

"But, youse already throw'd in with us! Didn't you fight on our side in the bunk house?"

"Fair fightin', with the odds about even's one thing, an' hay-burnin' in the night is somethin' else. An' besides, I didn't know what kind of an outfit you was. You got us kicked out of a good job with your talkin', but you can't talk us into burnin' no haystack!"

The big I. W. W. turned to the two, who stood at the man's side. "How about youse?" he asked, glaring into their faces.

"I think the same as him," answered one.

"I'm skeert," added the man who had told Connie he didn't want to quit. "I'm skeert to help burn the hay, an' I'm skeert not to."

The big man laughed, nastily: "You better be more skeert not to," he said, "We'll all git the blame of it, anyhow. But, if you throw in with us, they'll be four agin two, an' if we git caught we kin lay it on them two pardners of yourn. If we split three an' three, we all git it."

"I don't want to burn no hay," whimpered the man, "But, I'm skeert."

"Suit yerself," replied the big man, indifferently, and turned to join his two companions who waited beside the fence.

"I'll go! Wait! I'll go 'long! If us four all sticks together, we kin lay it on them two." He joined the three who were already crawling through the wire fence.

"Light her at both ends, an' in the middle," ordered the big man, as he made for the farther end of the stack. The two men in the road waited, undecided which way to turn. "What'll we do?" asked one.

"I ain't agoin' to run," said the other, "I ain't got nothin' to run fer. Let them that does the burnin' do the runnin'."

"But, s'pose they see the fire, an' come up an' ketch us?"

"It won't look so bad if we don't run, as if we do—" a bright tongue of flame shot upwards at a corner of the stack, and another from an opposite corner. By the light of the flames the two men saw two of the I. W. Ws. straighten up, and step back from the fire. The next instant at the outer rim of the fire light, they caught a blur of swiftly moving forms. A cry of terror reached their ears.

The flames were bright now, and by their light, they saw a rope shoot out, and one of the I. W. Ws. was jerked clear off his feet, and fell violently to the ground. A form ran toward them shrieking in fright and they recognized the "skeert" man. He, too, was jerked to the ground before he had run twenty feet. A shower of sparks shot upward, as one of the flame spots dimmed. A form rushed toward them stopping at the fence. "Come on, boys! Help fight fire!" The speaker was Connie Morgan and instantly the two men were at his side. It was but the work of a moment to crawl through the fence. As they ran toward the stack they pulled off their coats, and a moment later were working furiously beside men in high-heeled boots and chaps, beating down the flames with their coats while others tore at the stacks with pitch forks. In a few moments the fire was subdued, and the last spark beaten out. Two lanterns were lighted, and by their light, the men grouped themselves about the four forms that lay on the ground tightly bound with lariet ropes.

"Come on," said one of the two men who had refused to help fire the stack. "There ain't nothin' more fer us to do here. We'll be goin'.

"Don't let them two git away!' roared the big I. W. W. "They was into it, same as us. They was the lookouts!"

Connie Morgan laughed: "Hold on, boys!" he called, "How about going back on the job?"

The men turned and faced him. "We was in the fight in the bunk house, all right," answered the one. "An' you told him," he indicated the "skeert" man, who was whimpering and moaning upon the ground, "that it was too late to go back to work. That he'd ort to made up his mind before the fight."

"Well," answered Connie, "I've had time to change my mind since. You see, we figured about what would happen up here when we turned these I. W. Ws. loose, and we sort of got ready for it. The boys got in off the range tonight, and they rode out here and surrounded the stack while I was paying you off. Then I followed along behind the wagon to see the fun, and instead of going back with the wagon, I slipped in behind that hay cock over there, and so I couldn't help hearing what you fellows were talking about. I guess you know the I. W. Ws. now as well as I do. Back there in the bunk house you thought they were right. I

like to see a man willing to fight for what he really believes to be right. I need men like that. As long as I'm running the Round Seven, you two have got a job—that is if you want to come back."

"I'll say I do!" exclaimed the man, quickly. "It's the best blamed outfit I ever worked fer—an' as fer as wages goes, you kin pay me whatever you want."

"How about you?" asked Connie, turning to the other.

"I think the same as him," answered the man.

Connie gave a loud whistle, and presently the sound of creaking and the rattle of wheels announced the approach of the wagon. Tightly bound, the three I. W. Ws. were loaded in, and as the boys were about to load the man who had joined them at the last moment, Connie stepped forward and threw the rope off him. The man rose trembling to his feet and stood looking fearfully from one to another. No one paid him the slightest attention, and the boy turned to the others: "Come on, boys! Let's be getting back. I expect the cook has got that grub ready by this time."

The cowboys mounted their horses, and the others climbed into the wagon.

"How about me?" piped the man who had been released from his bonds. "Ain't you goin' to take me along?"

"Not you," answered the boy, "I ve got no use for your kind, whatever. Why, you're not even worth arresting!"

The cowboys started their horses, and the wagon followed the cowboys, and as it threaded its way through the cottonwoods that bordered the trail down the creek, a wailing cry was born to the ears of the riders: "I'm skeert all alone in the dark! I'm skeert!" and then the sound was drowned in the rush of water about the wheels as the wagon crossed at the ford. And as they emerged on the other side another sound was borne to their ears. It was the long cry of the cook: "Come on an' eat it or I'll throw it a-w-a-y!"

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE BAD LANDS

"WHAT'S the next thing on the program?" asked Connie Morgan, as he seated himself on the top rail of the horse corral beside Tex, the day after the fight in the bunk house. In the corral three cowboys were trying to saddle a three-year-old that had been retained with half dozen others out of a bunch of twenty odd head of horses that had been picked up off the range.

"Well," answered the foreman of the Round Seven, "There's quite a heft of chores that's got to be 'tended to. I want to start the beef round-up week after next, an' in the meantime there's a little overhaulin' to be done on the outfit. The front ax on the grub wagon's sprung, an' that cayuse we had to break in on the bed wagon jest naturally busted every strap on his harness except the collar an' tugs. He won't never make no harness horse no how an' he ain't big enough if he would, so we

got to break in a colt, or else take a work team off'n the ranch fer bed-wagon leaders."

Tombstone paused abruptly in the act of bolting extra clamps onto a hay-rack, and regarded the speaker with jaundiced eye. "Oh, sure, take a team off'n the ranch. We ain't only got five, six hundred ton of hay to put up yet, an' we kin haul that on a wheel-borrow. We ain't got nary team too many the way it is, an' here you go, takin' one of 'em to do a job which they's any jack-rabbit you ketch up off'n the range could do it."

Tex laughed: "You're plumb doleful-minded ain't you, Tombstone? If the world didn't look no better to me than what it looks to you, I'd of jumped in the river 'fore I'd got my growth."

"An' if you had, we'd of, mebbe, had a range foreman that didn't want to skin all the horses off'n the ranch right in the middle of hayin'. That's the trouble with you wagon-bosses. I never seen one yet that ever give a doggone how the ranch got along. They can't see nothin' but the cattle end of it—an' they won't never will, neither."

"Where does the money come from, if it ain't

from the cattle," grinned Tex. "This here ain't no hay ranch, it's a cow-outfit."

"Yes, an' if us ranch hands didn't git up enough hay, how'd yer weak stuff winter through? Here's the whole outfit goin' plumb straight to the dickens, an' no one worryin' none about it but me."

"Oh, I guess things ain't so bad as all that," smiled Connie. "Why it seems to me things are coming along fine. Here we've got rid of Harmon, an' his gang of rustlers. An' got rid of Wadell, or Curry, or whatever his name is, that'll give us one more team—an' we straightened out the trouble with the hay crew. Why, I think things are looking fine."

Tombstone spat precisely and accurately upon the head of the king bolt, and lugubriously shook his head: "That's jest the trouble," he foreboded, "Things is lookin' good. An' when things is lookin' good, that-a-way, then somethin' allus happens. As long as things is jest as bad as they kin git, they can't git no worser. But when they look good, then you got to look out. Where'd we be at right now if the eppyzootic hit the horses? Tell me that?"

Tex laughed outright: "Good gosh! Tombstone, they ain't never be'n no eppyzootic in this country that I ever heard tell of."

"That don't make no difference. They has in other countries. An' next time it'll prob'ly be here. An' besides that, s'pose they come on a wet spell. Where'd the rest of the hay be? Next winter'll prob'ly be a awful hard one."

"I never seen a wet spell in hayin' time yet, that was more'n jest a shower an' didn't hurt no hay. What makes you think next winter's goin' to be a bad one?"

"I know it is. Didn't I kick out a mice's nest in under the aidge of the old haystack? An' it was thicker than what the general run of 'em is. You can't fool me. Mouses knows. An' besides, I've saw a wet spell in hayin', if you ain't. It was in the summer of nineteen an' seven, an' I was workin' fer the Two-Bar."

"How much hay did they lose?"

"They didn't lose none, but they was lucky. If the wet spell had lasted longer, an' they hadn't be'n so fer along with the hayin', they might of lost a thousan' ton. An' then where'd they be'n?"

"Say, Tombstone," said Tex, soberly. "They's one worry you overlooked. See them mountains? Well, back a couple thousan' years or so ago, a mountain blow'd up an' buried a whole town—two of 'em—folks an' all. Now, where'd we be if one of them Bear Paws would take a notion to let go?"

"That's jest it," agreed Tombstone, "Where would we be? If this here other mountain blow'd up it ain't no cinch these here ones won't. If them folks would of thought the mountain was agoin' to blow up they wouldn't of built the town there. That's jest what I be'n tellin' you. I don't s'pose none of them folks had the sense to be worryin' about it. Or if they did, the rest of 'em prob'ly laughed at 'em."

"Worryin' about it wouldn't of done no good," grinned Tex. "They'd of got buried up jest the same."

"No, they wouldn t. If enough of 'em had of worried about it, they'd of moved their towns somewheres else, wouldn't they?'"

Tex winked at Connie, and pulled a long face: "They might of, but the chances is they'd of located 'em along side of some river that would of rose sudden, an' drounded 'em all."

Tombstone nodded: "Yeh, prob'ly would," he agreed, "That's jest what I be'n sayin'—when things looks good, that's the time somethin' most genelly allus happens."

Tombstone went off to the shop for more bolts, and Tex grinned; "Reckon we better break in a colt, an' save the whole outfit from goin' under. We got to run in some more wild horses anyway. I want the boys to break about a dozen saddle horses before the beef round-up. I only held over six hands from the calf round-up, so I'll put two of them breakin' horses, an' one to work on the wagon an' harness, an' let Tombstone have the rest to help with the hay. Me an' you will ride after the horses an' run 'em in."

Before Connie could reply things were happening in the corral. A cowboy had swung into the saddle, the two others cast loose the snubbing rope, and clambered up the pole fence as the broncho sunk his head.

"Stay with him!"

"Ride him, cowboy!"

"Fan him!"

"Stay a long time!"

Such were the words of advice and encourage-

ment that sounded above the thud of hoofs and the labored grunts of the horse as he leaped again and again into the air to hit the ground stiff-legged, with his back humped like the back of an angry cat. In the saddle the rider yelled shrill yells and plied his quirt. Round and round the small enclosure went the horse, bucking, sun-fishing, swapping ends without once loosening the seat of the rider who leaned far back against the cantle, left arm extended to the limit with the pull of the taut reins, right arm rising and falling, as with quirt and spurs he stung the frantic animal to bring out the worst that was in him and so conquer him in one ride. For full five minutes, with lathered flanks, the broncho fought to unseat the cowboy, but it was no use, and giving up, the horse sulked, and for another five minutes no amount of punishment with quirt or spur could get so much as a move out of him. With head drawn half way around, he stood the picture of sullen stubbornness.

"Open the gate!" cried the rider, and instantly the two cowboys who had sought refuge on the fence slid to the ground on the outside and mounting their horses held themselves in readiness to "haze" the broncho from plunging into obstruc-

tions that might injure both himself and his rider. For your unbroken horse cares nothing for the bit. Blinded by fear and rage he seeks only to rid himself of the thing that clings to his back, and pitching and bucking in his blind fury will crash into wagons, machinery, fences, buildings, anything in fact that happens to lie in his path unless there are horsemen at hand to crowd in and force him to hold to the open. Tex leaped to the ground and threw the pole gate wide. The rider slackened his reins for a moment, and seeing the opening, the broncho made a wild dash for liberty, his first rush taking him in a series of leaps and bucks, and clumsy lunges straight through the creek bed and out into a wide hay meadow upon the other side, the two hazers keeping pace to prevent the crazed animal from plunging into the barbed wire fences.

"Guess we might's well throw the shells on our own cayuses an' make a little ride today, boss. There's a bunch of horses runs between the lower end of Saw Tooth Butte an' the bad lands that we might run in. Last time I seen 'em there was four or five likely lookin' three-year-olds runnin' with 'em."

"Fine," answered Connie, "Let's go!" and led the way to the stable from which they emerged a few minutes later with their horses, and mounting swung off down the creek.

At the lower end of the hay field they met the three riders coming back. The broncho bathed in sweat, white foam dropping from his lips as he ceaselessly mouthed and fretted at the bit, was walking quietly enough between the horses of the other two riders.

"Takin' to it natural!" called the rider, as the two passed. "I'll be ridin' circle on this gent inside of a week."

"It doesn't take long to break them, does it?" commented Connie as, without dismounting Tex unfastened the wire gate and held it aside.

"Well, that's accordin' to the horse. Some breaks easy, an' some hard, an' some you never can break."

"What do you do with 'em when you can't break 'em?" asked the boy. "Turn 'em out on the range?"

"Not by a blame sight!" laughed Tex. "The outlaws are the ones that brings the most money. Wild West shows takes part of 'em, if they ain't

bad. What they want mostly is easy straight buckers an' crow-hoppers. Somethin' that's good an' safe to ride, but that looks to the pilgrims back east like they was raisin' the deuce. The bad outlaws goes to the real show—Cheyenne, Pendleton, Denver, Prescott an' Calgary. There's real riders in them annual rodeos. They ain't faked up like these here road shows, where some mail-order-catalogue cow puncher with buckin' rolls on his saddle big as a loaf of bread rides a crow-hopper acrost a base ball lot to the resoundin' plaudits of the multitude that thinks they're seein' the real thing."

An hour's ride brought them near the base of Saw Tooth Butte, a mountain which, together with its foot hills, forms one of the south-most reaches of the Bear Paws. "You better take the flat an' let me ride the high ground," advised Tex. "There's a lot of deep coulees an' draws, an' some of 'em's pretty well grow'd up to brush. It'll be harder ridin' up there an' a lot more chance of missin' the bunch. There's about thirty head altogether an' the leader's an' old gray mare that you got to watch every minute. She's a wise old crow-bate an' if you don't look out she'll slip the

bunch back past you up some coulee or behind some ridge. I'll keep my eyes open, an' if I see you start 'em I'll swing down an' help you."

It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon when Connie came upon the horses feeding in a shallow basin about halfway down a long, broad tongue of bench land that stretched straight into the bad lands. As the boy topped the rim of the basin, the horses ceased feeding and stood for a moment watching him with upraised heads and pricked ears. Connie swung wide to get behind them, but the old grey mare divining his intention, led off at a brisk trot, straight down the ridge. Slowing to a walk the boy tried to outwit them by riding slowly out of the basin at a right angle to their course. Once out of sight over the rim, he put spurs to his horse, and taking a parallel course, rode for half a mile at headlong speed. Then cautiously he drew up to the edge of the rim. The wild bunch was nowhere in sight. For a full minute he sat sweeping the plateau. A lone coyote loped along the farther rim of the basin. Two or three small bunches of cattle grazed undisturbed, but not the sign of a horse did he see. Then a blur of motion caught his eye, and he saw

the horses a good half mile ahead, just swinging up the far side of a coulee. His ruse had been too simple. The old mare had out-guessed him, and as soon as he had disappeared over the rim of the basin, she had changed her gait from a trot to a furious gallop, the herd following, and by the time the boy had maneuvered again to the rim, they were far in the lead.

Connie grinned: "Well, here goes!" he cried, and digging his spurs into his horse's flanks he started after the herd that had drawn to a halt on the open bench to study his next move. "I'll get around you some way!"

The tongue of bench on which the boy found himself was cut and scored by numerous deep coulees some of which reached clear across, while others shallowed and lost themselves in a maze of branches. It was not long before Connie realized that Tex had not over-estimated the sagacity of the old grey mare. When he emerged from the first of these transverse coulees, the horses had again disappeared, and it was only after a considerable search that he located their trail where the mare had led them into a deep ravine that led straight into the bad lands. Soon the boy found

that he had lost the trail completely. It had not been easy to follow along the sun-baked, grass-covered floor of the coulee where it traversed the bench, but after plunging into the bad lands, the grass-covered soil gave place to a bed of hard, disintegrated rock upon which the unshod feet of the horses made no impression whatever—at least none that Connie could follow. Side coulees joined the main stem at intervals, and the boy dismounted to examine the mouths of these in vain for some slight mark or track that would indicate the direction of the horses. On and on he rode, assuming that they were still ahead of him. Deeper and deeper he penetrated into the bad lands, the sides of the coulee getting steeper and higher as he followed its winding course.

He pushed on for several miles, giving no heed to time, his attention fixed solely upon following the band of horses. Suddenly, he pulled up, and glanced about him. It was getting late. The wall of the coulee, which had by this time become a veritable canyon, cast a deep shadow, and glancing upward, Connie saw that the edge of the shadow reached high on the opposite side. "I'll just look around this next bend," he said, "an'

then I'll turn back. Tex will laugh at me for losing the horses after I'd found 'em once, but I never did get a chance to head 'em."

Around the next bend he came upon a pool of stagnant water—the first water he had seen since noon. He realized that he was very thirsty. The horses would have been thirsty, too. He would surely find tracks about the edge of the pool. Dismounting he led his horse near to the water and searched the ground for sign. About the edge of the pool was a thick mud that would have plainly recorded the action of any animal that had come down to drink. But the mud was smooth and untrampled. The horses had not come that way. Some place they had turned into a side coulee, had doubled back, and were probably at that very moment grazing unconcernedly upon the bench.

The boy led his horse to the lower edge of the pool. The animal advanced, sniffing cautiously. He plunged his nose into the water and threw it about with a shake of his head. But he did not drink. Again and again he repeated the performance, pawing at the mud with his forefoot. "Drink, if you're goin' to," laughed the boy, "and quit your foolin'. And quit messing that puddle

all up. We've got to be hitting the back trail, but first I want about a barrel of that, myself." Dropping the reins, he picked his way to the upper end of the pool where a flat stone projected out into the water. Removing his hat, he threw himself down on his belly. With his lips almost upon the surface of the water he raised his head and listened. For several seconds he remained thus, but the only sounds that came to his ears were the sounds made by the rattling bit chains of his horse, and the soft scraping of the pawing hoof. "Thought I heard someone yell, a long ways off," he muttered, and again put his lips to the water.

"Spat!" Within two feet of his head, a bullet struck the pool, throwing a spray of muddy water all over him. Instantly the boy was on his feet, revolver in hand, while his eyes vainly sought the coulee for a sheltering rock. With a snort of fright at the wicked spat of the bullet, Connie's horse leaped back from the water and turning, plunged headlong down the canyon, bridle reins flying. A slight movement caught the boy's eye. He looked upward to see, on the rim of the canyon, and some distance below, the form of a man who seemed to be waving his hat and

frantically gesticulating. The next moment the man turned abruptly, swung himself to the back of a horse that had stood close beside him, and disappeared. Almost at the same instant the boy spied a niche in the rock wall on the opposite side and it was but the work of a moment to slip into the aperture which gave him a view of the lower reach of the canyon, the direction from which the bullet had come, and toward which his horse had bolted.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE OUTLAW

What did it all mean, wondered the boy, as he waited with his revolver at cock for the next move in the strange proceeding. Why should the man shoot once at him, and then evidently try to attract his attention? And why, after attracting his attention, had he immediately mounted his horse and disappeared? Had someone else fired the shot? The boy scanned every visible foot of canyon, and of the rims of its high walls, but no living, moving thing met his gaze. It was growing rapidly darker, now. Evidently the sun had set, for there was no streak of light even along the very top of the opposite wall. He debated what he should do. He certainly didn't want to spend the night cramped up in the uncomfortable niche, neither did he want to expose himself to a possible shot from the rims. He was not afraid, but he had no desire to be potted without any chance of shooting

back. He remembered that he had thought he heard a cry when he first stooped over the water to drink. In thinking it over he was almost certain it had been a cry. What had that cry to do with the shot? He remembered to have heard that the bad lands was the home of numerous desperadoes and outlaws, but he had heard, also, that unless they were molested they remained on friendly terms with outsiders, and especially with ranchers whose property bordered on their domain. He wondered if it were possible that Kid Owens or Bill Harmon had broken jail and joined the outlaws. Either one of them might have taken a shot at him in revenge, but if so, why had they tried to attract his attention afterward?

Connie gave it up as he found his thoughts travelling in circles. He would wait till dark, slip from his uncomfortable perch, get a drink of water, and then—he was undecided whether to follow his horse in hope of overtaking him, or to hit the back-trail and try to make the Round Seven on foot. "If I only had shoes or moccasins instead of these doggoned high heeled boots," he muttered, eyeing the offending foot gear with disfavor. Minutes passed that seemed hours to the boy in his

cramped position, and with his mouth and throat parched with thirst. It looked tantalizingly near —that pool of water, and it was with an effort that he forced himself to remain where he was until darkness came.

Suddenly he heard a sound. Someone was coming up the canyon. He could hear the click and scrape of horse's feet on the rock floor. Gun in hand he waited. The sounds grew louder, and presently he made out the form of a horse and rider moving slowly toward him. The man was very close now, and Connie could see that he was leading a riderless horse—his horse! At the lower edge of the pool the rider drew up, and looked carefully about him. Connie noted that the butt of a six-gun protruded from a holster at the man's belt, and that the stalk of a rifle peeped from beneath the stirrup leather at the back of his leg. Suddenly, the man called: "Hey, there! Hey you, Round Seven!"

"Right here!" answered the boy, in a firm voice. "And you might as well know I've got you covered!"

"Oh, that's all right," answered the man. "I ain't a-goin to make no gun-play. But, where be you?"

For answer Connie scrambled from his niche and faced the man not ten feet distant, still keeping him covered with his revolver.

"You kin put up yer gun," grinned the man, "I done all the shootin' I aim to do a while back."

"Yes, and you blame near got me, too. What's the idea?"

"No, I didn't blame near git you, neither. If I'd wanted to got you I'd done it, jest as easy as shootin' where I did. I dropped that pill right where I wanted to drop it, an' no wheres else, an' it's a darn good thing fer you I did."

"For me!" exclaimed the boy, in surprise, as he returned the gun to its holster, "What do you mean—a good thing for me?"

"Well, if I hadn't, you'd prob'ly be dead by now, or leastwise layin' on the rocks somewheres doubled up with a bellyache that would of got you before mornin'. Don't you know that there spring is pizen?"

"Poison!" cried Connie, a sudden chill at his heart, as he thought of how near he had come to drinking from it.

"Yes, pizen—gyp water, some says, but others claims its arsenic. Don't make no difference what

name you call it by it'll kill you jest as quick. I was a watchin' you from the rim, an' when I seen you was goin' to drink, I yelled till I like to bust a lung. Thought first you heerd me, but you stuck down yer head agin, an' I done the only thing I could think to do—I dropped a rifle pill jest as clost as I dasted to."

Connie, who had been staring down at the water in a sort of fascinated horror as the man talked, stepped quickly to his side, and reaching up took the gloved hand that rested on the horn of the saddle. "You did the right thing," he said, gravely, "At just the right time. And that's what I call a man. But, how did you know that water was poison? And how do you tell poison water from water that ain't?"

"That's easy," answered the man, "Don't never drink no water yer horse won't drink, an' yer safe. When you seen yer horse stand there pawin' an' thrashin' the water around with his nose, you'd ort to know'd the water was pizen."

"I thought he wasn't thirsty."

"I've hear'n tell how you come from Alasky, same as Wilson. An' likewise I've read how dogs is used up there fer to git over the country instead

of horses. It's be'n a middlin' hot day, an' if you'd savvied horses, you'd know'd doggone well yer horse would of be'n dry enough to of drunk any water that was fit to drink."

"Anybody ought to have known that," agreed Connie, sheepishly, "Gee, I was a fool!"

"Oh, I don't know," answered the man, "That ain't exactly the way you're figgered in these parts. Take me, or any of the boys from around here an' dump us up there in Alasky with a bunch of dogs to git over the ground with, an' we'd most likely pull more foolisher plays than what you done."

"There's no such thing as poison water up there," said the boy, "I wasn't thinking about it. But, isn't there any water around here that isn't poison? I sure am thirsty!"

For answer the man reached behind him, loosened a pack string that held his yellow slicker in place, and thrusting his hand beneath the folds of the slicker, drew out a can of tomatoes, which he proceeded to open with his knife: "Here," he said, handing the tin to Connie, "Drink this. It's better'n water when yer dry, an' handier to carry."

Eagerly Connie gulped down the juice and the

soft red pulp. When the can was half emptied, he offered it to the other.

"I ain't dry," said the man, "Finish her up, an' we'll git a-goin'. Guess I'm the party yer huntin' fer, an' I'll go 'long peaceable. You kin take my guns if it'll make you feel any better."

Connie tossed away the empty can and stared at him in astonishment: "What in thunder do you mean? I ain't hunting for anybody. I was hunting Round Seven horses. I ran onto the bunch back there on the bench and when they headed down this coulee I took after them, but I guess they gave me the slip somewhere."

"They wouldn't of come very fer down into the bad lands. They run up some side coulee, an' doubled back on you. But, it don't make no partic'lar difference, fer as that goes. I'll go 'long with you anyhow. I'd ruther you'd git the money than anyone else, on account of what you done fer my brother."

Connie laughed: "I guess you're talking to the wrong person. I don't know anything about this money. And I told you I wasn't hunting for anybody. And I don't know anything about your brother."

"No, I ain't talkin' to no wrong person. I know who you be, all right. Yer the Round Seven Kid —that's what folks calls you around here. They took you fer a joke at first, but sense you've cleaned out Bob Harmon an' his gang an' run Curry off the crick, an' them other fake nesters, they've begun to set up an' take notice. John Grey, the sheepman, he's my brother. The Round Seven's be'n tryin' to bust him, an' they'd of got him this year, sure. John was on his last legs when you come along. An' what do you do? Do you give him the last push that would shoved his nose in under? You don't. You reaches out an' sets him on his feet agin. You loans him a team, gives him back more hay than what the Round Seven cattle et up. An' then you digs down in yer pocket an' loans him the money to lamb out his band. An' yer men's got orders to keep the cattle off'n his sheep range. Dick Grey's my name. I'm outlawed, an' I be'n hidin' out fer the last six months in the bad lands. But I slip over an' see John now an' then, an' Samuels, an' Campbell, an' kind of keep posted. So, bein' as things is, I'd ruther you'd git the five hundred dollars' reward that's on me, than anyone else."

Again Connie laughed: "You're out of luck, if you expect me to take you in. I ain't looking for any reward money. So the best thing for you to do is to turn around and beat it, and I'll go on back home."

The man shook his head: "It's this way," he said. "I'm tired of bein' on the run. I'm broke. I'm outlawed so I can't git a job on no cow-outfit. The only way I could keep goin' would be to turn into a real outlaw an' start in runnin' off horses. I guess I could git away with it, all right—but I don't aim to do it."

"Are you a cow-hand?" asked the boy, abruptly.

"I ain't never worked at nothin' else."

"All right, you come right along with me to the ranch. I don't know why you were outlawed. You don't look to me like a crook. Anyway, after what you did for me, I'm willing to take a chance. If you want to work, I'll give you a job."

"I ain't no crook, neither. They's plenty of 'em that knows me will tell you the same thing. It was a frame-up to git my claim. But, I ain't a-goin' to git you in bad—not after what you done fer John, I ain't."

Connie reached for his bridle reins, and mounted:

"You come with me," he ordered. "We'll go to the ranch, an' get something to eat, and then you can tell me about it. If it's true that you're the victim of a frame-up, I'll stand back of you with every dollar I've got! And before we get through with it, someone's goin' to get hurt!"

"I'll go along an' tell you about it," agreed the man, "But, that's the end of it. I ain't goin' to git you mixed up in it. The PU.'s a big outfit. They'd bust you. An' you can't buck Major Hogan. He's a big man around these parts."

"Yes, and the bigger they are the harder they fall—don't forget that. If we've got the right on our side we don't need to be afraid of 'em no matter who they are. And as for busting me, I'll take a chance on that. Believe me, if they try that game, they'll know they've be'n somewhere! It'll cost 'em a half a dozen outfits the size of the PU. Where would I be now if you hadn't dropped that bullet right under my nose?"

The Round Seven ranch house lay dark in its little grove of cottonwoods and willows as the two riders topped the rim of Eagle and descended into the valley of the creek.

After putting up the horses, Connie led the way

to the kitchen where he proceeded to "rustle" a cold lunch. He had just got nicely started when the door of the cook's room opened and Walt Jones appeared, bare-footed, and with one strap of his suspenders a-dangle. He stood for a moment in the doorway, blinking from one to the other of the marauders.

"Hello, Walt," grinned Grey.

"Hello, Dick." The cook advanced into the room. "You two chase yerselves out of here an' don't come back till you hear me yelp," he ordered.

"Go on back to bed, Walt," Connie answered, "We can find all we want."

"Yes, an' mess up my kitchen till *I* won't never be able to find what *I* want no more!" As he talked the cook had laid a fire in the big stove, liberally drenched the wood and kindlings with kerosene, touched a match to it, and already the flames were roaring up the stove pipe. "Go on, git! Things is comin' to a pretty pass when a man wakes up in the middle of the night an' finds his kitchen full of outlaws an' coffee-coolers clawin' around amongst the grub. Clear out, now, an' give me room to move around, an' in a few minutes I'll holler."

Connie laughed and led the way to the living room where, after removing spurs and chaps, Grey lighted his pipe and tilted his chair against the wall. Connie, similarly divested of riding gear, regarded the man thoughtfully for a few moments. "It's like this, Dick," he began, abruptly: "If I'm going to work and straighten this trouble out, I've got to know the facts in the case just as they happened."

Grey nodded: "It won't take long to tell 'em. I've rode fer the PU. fer the last five er six years an' a couple of years ago I filed on a homestead on the crick jest below the PU. fences. It run along till about six months ago, an' one day the Major was out to the ranch. You know he's manager of the PU. as well as Injun agent. Some says it's agin the law to be both. I don't know. Anyways he hunted me up an' asks me what I'm aimin' to do with that claim. I told him I aimed to prove up on it when the time come an' start me a little outfit of my own. That didn't suit him none whatever. It don't never suit no big outfit fer to have nesters comin' into the country. They want to hog the hull State of Montany. 'How long you helt it?' he says, "Bout a year an' a

half,' I tells him. 'You've had it long enough so you kin prove up by buyin' in fer a dollar an' a quarter an acre,' he says. I told him I know'd that, but I aimed to take the hull five years to prove up, an' save the two hundred dollars it would cost me to buy it in. 'You'll buy it in now,' he says. 'I'll put up the money, an' when you git yer patent I'll give you another two hundred fer it.' I told him I didn't aim to sell it, an' he got mad an' cussed around an' threatened what he'd do to me if I didn't sell out to the PU. I let him go an' when he'd got through I quit the outfit, an' then I up an' told him a few. We had it backward an' forward fer a while, until he up an' called me a name I won't take off'n no man livin', I don't care if he's manager of an' outfit, an' Injun agent er what he is. So I hauled off an' pasted him one that blacked both his eyes, an' then I throw'd the kak on my cayuse an' fogged it. I come down here to John's fer a few days, but I don't like to be around sheep much, so I drifted over an' helped Mike Campbell an' Samuels with their stock, just grub-linin', sort of, till the round-up started when I aimed to hit the IX. outfit fer a job.

"Well, I was ridin' one day south of the reser-

vation, when I come onto a PU. mare an' a young colt. The colt was so lame he couldn't put one fore foot to the ground, so I dobbed my rope onto him an' throwed him to see what was the matter. He'd run a mean sliver right up into the frog an' I was workin' on it when I looks up, an' there set the Major an' a couple of his cow-hands lookin' at me. 'Caught in the act!' I says, sort of grinnin' up at 'em, an' quick as a flash, the Major he turns to the boys an' he orders 'em to make a ride down Cow Crick. Then he rides right up to where I'm workin' with my knife on that sliver. I didn't say nothin' an' he didn't neither till I'd finished an' turned the colt loose. Then he says: 'I guess you'll sell me that claim, now, won't you?' he says. 'No,' says I. 'I won't. Not now, nor no other time.' 'All right,' he says, 'Suit yerself. If you don't you'll do time fer horse stealin'. Take yer pick.' 'Horse stealin'?' I says, 'You know blame well I wasn't doin' no horse stealin'. I seen that colt would die or be stiffened up fer life if that sliver wasn't got out, so I done it. An' you know blame well that's the truth—you've set there an' watched me do it fer the last fifteen minutes. An' besides, them other boys seen it, too.' The Major, he

laughs: 'What they saw,' he says, 'from where we pulled up our horses, was you with an unbranded colt on the ground, and a PU. mare runnin' circles around you whinnerin' her head off. I took good care to get the boys out of the way before they saw any more. They saw just enough to put you behind the bars—an' no more.'

"I couldn't hardly believe a man would be that ornery. Here was me workin' to save one of his colts, an' him usin' it agin me to make me sell him my claim, or go to the pen! I seen in a minute that what he said was true. Them boys was square, all right, an' not bein' clost enough to see what was goin' on, they'd swear to what they seen —an' any jury would convict a man on that, 'special, when the Major could prove I had a grudge agin him an' had blacked his eyes. I seen I was in bad, an' I was mad clean through.

"You see, the Major, he'd git the claim now, no matter which way things went. If I agreed to buy it in an' sell it to him, he'd have it, an' if I didn't he'd outlaw me, an' I wouldn't dare to show up to do my assessment work an' 'stablish residence, an' then it would go back to the Government an' he'd git someone else to file that would sell to him.

"Right then was the only time I ever wanted to shoot a man, but I helt onto myself—even draw'd my gun an' unloaded it an' put the ca'tridges in my pocket. I was afraid he'd say somethin' that would make me lose my head fer a second—an' I know'd that if I had to stop to load up my gat, I'd have time to git my right senses back before I done somethin' I'd be sorry fer. It wound up by me lightin' in an' tellin' him an earful, an' then we rode off in opposite directions.

"To make his play right good, the Major got some of his cow-hands to hair-brand three or four PU. colts with my horse brand. I don't reckon the boys know'd it was my brand. I never used it because I never had nothin' but a saddle horse an' I always had a bill of sale fer it. But I had recorded the brand when I filed the claim, an' the Major know'd it. They was his colts an' I guess the boys figgered if he wanted 'em hair-branded that was his business. Anyhow, after he'd done that he sent fer the sheriff an' took him out on the range an' show'd him these colts, an' the two boys told how they seen me with a PU. colt throw'd. The Major posted a two hundred an' fifty dollar reward, an' the State, or County, or Stock Associ-

ation or someone put up another two-fifty, an' I was outlawed. I hit fer the bad lands, an' I be'n there ever since. But, I'm through. I'm broke, an' it's come, like I told you, to where I either got to turn horse-thief to live, or give myself up. An' I don't aim to turn horse-thief."

The cook thrust his head into the room and announced supper, and all through the meal Connie pondered. When it was finished, and they were once more in the living room, the boy grinned: "We'll turn in, now," he said. "It's nearly one o'clock."

"I guess I'll jest hit out," said Grey. "If the sheriff should happen to come along an' find me here, it would git you in bad fer harborin' an outlaw."

"That's your room in there," answered the boy, ignoring the other's words. "In the morning we'll get busy and straighten this thing out—or start in on it, anyway."

Grey shook his head: "I can't figger no way out. They got too good a case. Them hair-branded colts was what cinched it."

"Yes," answered the boy, "That's exactly what did cinch it—*for us.* If the Major had had sense

enough to have made out his case on the evidence he had when you and he parted that day, things would have looked pretty bad. But, the way it is, now we've got everything our way. You see, I spent a year in the Mounted, and I learned a few things about crooks. One thing I learned was that it's just as dangerous for a crook to over-play his hand, as it is for him to get careless and under-play it. That's why a crook has got the hardest job in the world. He's got one thin line to travel on—and that's all. And it takes more brains than most men have got, to find that line, and to travel it. The trouble with Major Hogan, is: He overplayed his hand!"

CHAPTER XIX

AT THE AGENCY

After breakfast on the morning following Connie's talk with the outlaw, the boy called Tex aside: "Know a fellow named Dick Grey?" he asked.

"Sure, I know him. Brother to John Grey down the crick. Worked with him on the PU, couple of years back. Heard he'd got into some kind of rookus with Major Hogan, an' the Major got him outlawed fer horse-stealin'."

"Do you believe it—that Grey's a horse thief?"

"No, I wouldn't believe nothin' Major Hogan said, unless he had the papers for it. An' then I wouldn't believe Dick Grey's a horse thief. 'Cause he ain't. What you want to know about him for?"

"I want to give him a job. He says he's a cowhand."

"There ain't no better one. But—he's outlawed."

"That's just it. And we've got to fix it so he isn't outlawed," answered the boy, and proceeded to tell the whole story to Tex, just as Grey had told it to him the night before. "And, now, what are we going to do about it?" he concluded.

The foreman grinned: "Anyone around here that would undertake to buck the Major would prob'ly find out he'd bit off more than he can chaw. He's a pretty slick article. He does just about as he pleases, an' what he says goes."

"What do you mean?" asked the boy.

"Well, there's Cato Emery. He's the Major's agency clerk. He an' I are pretty good friends, an' he tells me a lot of things he wouldn't tell no one else. For instance, about the Major, as Injun Agent, makin' contracts with the PU. Cattle Co., the Major bein' manager of the PU. They say that's agin the law. An' if it ain't it ought to be, 'cause the PU. pays for pasturin' five thousan' head on the reservation, an' then they run in ten or fifteen thousan'. An' other outfits that run cattle there—like our five hundred head—the Government never sees a cent of that money. It all sticks to the Major. They ain't even a report goes in of any other cattle bein' on the

reservation for the reason that it's figured that five thousan' head is all it will pasture."

"How does he get away with it?" asked the boy.

"Greasin' wise inspectors, an' bluffin' green ones. He's the biggest bluffer loose, the Major is. He's got every one bluffed."

"He hasn't got me bluffed," answered the boy, quickly. "And besides, this bluffing game is a game that two can play. There isn't any way we could find out whether it's true about those hair brands, is there?"

"We might," answered Tex. "Two of our boys worked for the PU. up till a couple months ago. Maybe they know somethin' about it. Wait here a minute."

The foreman stepped to the corral, and returned a few moments later followed by one of the boys who was helping to break a broncho. "Red Carney, here, he's one of the *hombres* that helped do it. Tell us about it Red."

"Well, the Major he come along one day, an' he says how he wanted me an' Bill Hansen to ride with him down to the big pasture where they was a lot of mares an' colts. There's a corral down there an' he had us run in a half a dozen head an'

cut out the colts an' turn the mares back in the pasture. 'I want to play a joke on a friend of mine,' he says, 'An' I want you boys to take these clippers an' work a hair brand onto them colts. We won't let 'em out onto the range,' he says, 'We'll jest let 'em run with the mares in the field.' So we went to work an' done it, him watchin' on till we was through."

"What brand did you put on them?" asked the boy.

"It was a quarter-circle D, like this." He traced the brand in the dirt with a stick.

"Whose brand is that?" asked Connie.

"I don't know if it's anyone's brand. That's the way he wanted it, an' that's the way we done it. They was his colts, an' we didn't ask no questions."

"What did you do with the colts when you got through?" asked Tex.

"Turned 'em out in the field again with the mares. Then we went back to the ranch, but the Major, he rode on. Next day one of the boys found where the wires to the big pasture had be'n cut an' all the mares an' colts was scattered clean to the Mizoo. Kind of funny, about that

cuttin'," grinned Red. "When the Major was clawin' around in his pocket after them clippers, the first thing he brung out was a pair of wire-cuttin' pliers. He never know'd I seen 'em, an' he slipped 'em back. It wasn't none of my business —it was his fence."

After the cow-boy had returned to the corral, Connie turned to Tex: "That Quarter-circle D is Dick Grey's horse brand. He told me. Guess I'll just saddle up and ride to town for a day or so. It's sort of dull around here——"

"Say, boss," interrupted Tex, "If you aim to slip over to the reservation an' lock horns with the Major, take me along, will you? That there is sure one projeck I'm honin' to see!"

Connie laughed "Dick Grey is in the house. Keep him here at the ranch, and tomorrow I'll telephone you where to meet me. I'll probably want him to go with me, and you can come, too, if you want to."

In town, the boy hunted up the sheriff who greeted him cordially: "Hello, Morgan! Got any more cattle rustlers rounded up?"

"No, not exactly," grinned the boy. "I know where Dick Grey is, though."

The sheriff regarded him curiously: "What you mean?" he asked.

"Why, Dick Grey's an outlaw, isn't he? You want him, don't you?"

The officer, seated upon a bench in front of the livery and boarding stable, reached down with his knife, before replying, and speared a chip. "Set down a bit," he invited, "An' tell me about Dick. He ain't be'n botherin' yer stock, has he?"

"No, but there's a reward up for him, isn't there?"

"Seems to me they is," replied the sheriff, and the boy noted that the tone was as hard and as cold as the thin, keen blade that sliced a shaving from the chip. "Where 'bouts is he at? You claimed to know."

It was with difficulty that Connie maintained a grave face: "He's at my ranch."

Another shaving curled from the chip and fell to the sidewalk. "You're holdin' him down there fer me to come an' git him so you kin claim the reward?" The man's cordiality was all gone, now; and the boy caught the note of contempt in the words. His mouth twitched at the corners just as the sheriff cast a sidewise glance into his

face. The next moment the officer's elbow dug him a prod in the ribs: "Doggone you, boy! You had me goin' fer sure." The lips behind the drooping mustache were grinning. "I had you sized up different than that—an' you kind of give me a jolt. Come on, now—what's on your chest? They ain't no one here but us two."

"They say Dick's a good cow-hand, and I want to hire him."

The officer frowned, and shook his head, slowly: "I sure wisht you could, Morgan, but—'twouldn't work. They's plenty folks would talk. 'Twouldn't be no time till Major Hogan heard about it, an' I'd have to go down there an' fetch him in."

Connie nodded: "That's just what I figured," he answered. "But suppose Major Hogan should withdraw his charge against him, or at least, for some reason or other, should refuse to prosecute him, what then?"

"Well, in such case, me an' Rudie Weight, he's the prosecutin' attorney, we might kind of git together an' have the warrant withdraw'd or nolled, or whatever they call it. But, they ain't no chanct that Hogan'll let up on him. He ain't that kind. When he onct gits it in fer a man, that

man might's well pull his freight. I don't know the inside of that there deal, but I'd bet a hat, Dick never branded no PU. colts, without he slapped the PU. brand onto 'em."

"I know the inside of it," answered the boy, "And that's what I came to see you about." For a half-hour he talked while the sheriff listened, as he sliced thin shavings from his chip. Only one interruption occurred when a loquacious person adorned with a brand new mail-order cow costume swaggered up and seated himself beside the officer: "Hello, shurff! How's every little thing?"

The sheriff regarded him coldly: "Little things like this here bench ain't commodious fer more'n two folks to onct." He pointed with his knife blade to a vacant chair in front of the hotel across the street: "If you ain't suited to keep on walkin', that there chair ort to fit your shape purty good."

"But, I got somethin' to tell you," answered the man, with an elaborate wink.

"Don't fergit to remember it next time you see me. Good day."

When the man had passed out of hearing Connie

finished his story, and the officer continued to whittle for several minutes. Then, very deliberately, he tossed away the remnant of his chip and put up his knife. "I guess that's about the straight of it. But, that don't git us nowheres. Knowin' somethin's one thing, an' bein' able to prove it's another. You couldn't prove nothin' you've told me. Hogan's got enough folks under his thumb so he's about law proof. Them that's be'n in with him on these here deals would have to stay by him to save their own hides, an' besides, he's got plenty others to swear the way he tells 'em. Fact is, he's got this here country pretty well bluffed, an' he goes ahead an' does just about as he pleases, gover'ment or no gover'ment. When it come to a show-down he'd wiggle out somehow, an' then he'd start in to git even with every man that had anythin' to do with it."

Connie smiled: "I've got a hunch that it will never come to a show-down. You see, I haven't been in the country long enough to be afraid of him. And I've noticed that the last thing in the world that a bluffer wants is a show-down. A bluffer's got to either quit cold, or keep on bluffing. Isn't that right?"

The sheriff nodded: "Sounds reasonable, an' jibes in with, what you might say, numerous an' sundry observations of my own, except an' pervidin' you've left out one main item. In order to force this here bluffin' party's hand, you got to find someone that's got the nerve an' the where-with-all to make him quit. There's plenty folks would like to see Hogan's bluff called, but there ain't no one that would care to undertake the job of callin' it."

"Tex is going to pull the wagons in a few days and I promised Dick Grey a job on the beef round-up," answered Connie. "So, I guess I'll just saddle up and ride over to the reservation. And by the way, if Hogan should happen to call you up and withdraw his charge against Dick, you be ready to take it up with the district attorney."

"You mean you're goin' over there an' lock horns with the Major! An' you, what you might say, jest a kid! Son, they wouldn't be enough left of you when you got through to grease a skillit! You, with cattle on the range, ain't in no shape to buck him—he'd ruin you!"

Connie laughed: "There's a fellow up our way

that makes his living fiddling for dances, and killing meat for the camps. He isn't a very big man, but he's killed more bear and moose, I guess, than any man in Alaska. Fiddling Taylor, they call him, and one day he came onto a big grizzly asleep on a rock. Taylor got his rifle all ready, and then picked up a dead spruce sapling and prodded the bear in the ribs to hear him growl."

"Well, what happened?" asked the sheriff, after some moments of silence.

"The bear growled all right. Gee! Taylor said you could have heard him four miles up and down the creek. He wasn't over ten feet away, and he held his rifle right on the bear's eye. But, when the bear moved, he moved so quick Taylor couldn't shoot."

Connie paused again.

"But, doggone it! What happened?"

"Why, the bear's going yet. You see, when he moved, he moved the other way. As far as bulk goes, the bear would have made ten of Taylor, but——"

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared the sheriff. "I git you, all right, son. I'll be in town fer the next

couple days. You might swing around this way 'fore you go back to the ranch."

Connie called up the Round Seven, and about noon the next day he picked up Tex and Dick Grey at the reservation fence, and together they rode to the agency.

A half-dozen Indians were at work painting the agency buildings, and as they drew near Tex indicated a tall man with a huge gray mustache and pointed imperial, who seemed to be directing the work: "There's the Major now. An' there's Steve Longknife, his pet Injun police. That buildin' they're workin' on is the agency jail-house. Shines up pretty good on the outside, don't it, Dick?"

The man addressed grinned a grin that seemed to lack wholeheartedness.

"Dick kind of figgers it ain't goin' to make no difference to him how it looks on the outside," hazarded the foreman.

The three dismounted and Connie stepped forward, as the tall grey man turned to meet them: "Major Hogan?" asked the boy.

"That's me. What do you want? Be quick about it. I haven't got time to fool around."

"Morgan is my name. I'm the new owner of the Round Seven."

"You!"

The boy flushed at the mingled surprise and contempt of the man's tone. "Yes, me," he answered, but before he could continue, he was interrupted by the voice of the Major, who had taken a step forward his eyes on the face of Dick Grey.

"Of all the confounded nerve!" he roared. "I'll put you where you belong, Dick Grey! Hey, Steve! Steve!" The Indian policeman was at his side in a moment and Hogan pointed a finger shaking with rage at Dick Grey. "Take that man and lock him in a cell! Might as well not have any sheriff when outlaws with a price on their heads can ride the open range! Maybe McLaughlin can find him, now. Wait till I phone him!" The Major turned abruptly and stamped into the office.

Grey submitted peacefully to arrest, and Connie and Tex followed the Major into the building.

A few minutes later Sheriff McLaughlin stepped out of the telephone booth in Red Bank, and shook his head dolefully: "Young Morgan must

of give the Major an awful proddin'. Accordin' to his tell, that there bear of Taylor's could of be'n heard four mile an' I jest heard the Major growl better'n twenty-two mile! An' it looks from here like he'd follered up his growl. I told that kid he better lay off the Major!"

CHAPTER XX

CONNIE CALLS A BLUFF

In the agency office, Hogan snapped the receiver onto the hook, and glared contemptuously at Connie: "Your maw don't care what kind of company you keep, does she?" he snapped.

"She didn't know I was coming here—to the agency," answered the boy.

"What?"

"I say, she didn't know I was coming over here to see you."

"I was talking about Dick Grey. Didn't you know he's an outlaw?"

"Yes," answered the boy, looking the man squarely in the eye. "And I know why. That's one of the things I wanted to see you about. There are some other things, too."

"Well, spit it out."

"About those cattle of mine that I'm pasturing on the reservation. Mr. Rutledge, here, my fore-

man, reports that the Indians have killed several head for beef."

"Well, what about it?"

"He says they don't kill any PU. stuff on the reservation for beef."

"That's your hard luck. What you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to put in a claim for damages."

The man sneered: "Claim for damages, eh? All right, put it in. But, I'll tell you before you do, you might as well save yourself the trouble. The Government don't guarantee you'll take as many head off the reservation in the fall as you put on in the spring. All your fifty cents a head buys, is the right to pasturage."

"I'd like to see a copy of the permit, please."

"What permit?"

"Why, the permit under which I am pasturing five hundred head of cattle on the reservation."

"Oh, you would, eh? Well, you can't."

"I've got a right to see it, haven't I?"

"I'm the agent of this reservation, an' what rights you've got here are just what I say you've got. You get that, do you?"

Connie nodded: "Yes, I get it. And, now about

Dick Grey. I wish you would call up the sheriff again, or the prosecuting attorney and tell him that you've decided to drop the case against Grey, and are withdrawing the reward. You see, I've hired him for a rider, and I kind of want to get his record cleared up."

The Major glared for a moment as though the boy had taken leave of his senses. "What! What —what in thunder do you mean? Of all the impudent young puppies I ever heard of! Look here, if you want to file any fool complaint, go ahead and write it out and then get out of here! And let me give you a little advice young fellow, if you expect to stay in this country it isn't going to do you any good to be mixed up with crooks and horse thieves."

"That's good advice, Major. And that's the reason I want to get Dick's case straightened out. You see, I know all about his claim that you want to get hold of, and about the hair-branding that you ordered done in the corral that day, and about your cutting the fence afterward. One of the boys that did the branding is working for me."

"Look here," roared the Major, "I don't know what you're talking about! If anybody's been

feeding you up on any cock-and-bull story all I've got to say is to let 'em tell it to the judge when Grey has his trial. I guess when I get through with what I've got to say, and the boys on the PU. ranch, any testimony your lone cow-hand brings out will look kind of sickly. But, I've listened to enough of this nonsense. Here's a pen and paper. Write out your fool complaint and get out of here!"

"Oh, I'm not going to file any complaint here," answered the boy. "When the inspector from Washington comes I'll file it with him."

"Inspector from Washington! What in thunder are you talking about?"

"If he started yesterday he ought to be along in a day or two. You see, Major, I'm a sort of a green hand around this part of the country, and I've had to do a lot of enquiring around. I've found out quite a lot of things, but there are some things that aren't quite clear yet. And the funny part of it is that the Indian Department at Washington is almost as much in the dark as I am. That's why they're going to send this inspector out so you can help him straighten things out. Why, they haven't any record of any Round Seven

cattle ever having been pastured on the reservation, nor any other brands except the PU. And, they think there's only about five thousand head of PU. cattle on the reservation, and of course we know there's ten or fifteen thousand head. And, maybe you wouldn't believe it, Major, but they don't even know you're manager of the PU.!"

At first mention of the inspector the blood had rushed into the Major's face flushing it a fiery red, but at the next few sentences the blood slowly receded, and his whole figure seemed to shrink so that when Connie finished his face was deathly pale, and he sat slouched down in his chair, speechless, like a man who had been stunned. "What—what do you—mean?" he asked, in a bewildered tone that faltered as though his brain groped for words.

"Why, I mean that in a couple of days now, we will have this business all cleared up, and——"

"And, you say there's a special inspector coming from Washington? Coming here—without notice!"

"I don't know anything about any notice. But, if he started yesterday he ought to be here

tomorrow, or next day. It's according to the connections he makes at Chicago and St. Paul."

"Why in thunder didn't you come to me with this instead of taking it up with the department?" There was a hint of the man's habitual bluster in the tone, and it was evident that his fright was giving place to rage. "You've stirred up a nice mess! Young man, do you know you've ruined me? You young fool! Don't you know that if you'd come to me first with what you've just told me, you could have forced me to pay for your dead beef, and let you pasture on the reservation in the future for nothing, and withdraw my charge against Grey besides? Now, I've got to skip the country or be hauled up before the department, and you don't get a cent out of it, one way or another! That's what comes of a fool kid blundering around without knowing the first principles of business."

"Where I came from crookedness isn't figured as one of the principles of business," answered the boy dryly. "You see, since I took hold of the Round Seven, I've had to kind of jump in and help clean up the country. Men like you and Bill

Harmon have been pulling it pretty raw around here just because nobody figured it was their business to call your bluff. You're right about having to either skip the country, or being hauled up before the department. But you're dead wrong about it's not doing me a cent's worth of good. It will do me, and the Indians, and the whole country good, to have you some place else. But, before you go, you're going to pay me for twelve head of steers at forty dollars a head, and you're going to turn Dick Grey loose, and then call up the sheriff and tell him you have withdrawn your charge against him. Maybe he's started for here, but if he has you can leave a note for him, before you pull out for somewhere else."

The man's face reddened almost to a purple: "You confounded young whelp! I'll—I'll—Are you so blamed ignorant you can't get it through your head that you've lost your only chance of getting paid for those steers? And, as for Grey, that horse-thieving charge will hang over him till it outlaws, for all of me! You've forced me out of the country with your bull-headed blundering—but it will cost you something to do it!"

"It isn't the money I care about. Ridding the

country of a man like you is worth a whole lot more than the price of a few steers. And, of course Dick Grey could stand trial and be acquitted if you weren't here to prosecute him. It isn't that— it's just that I'd hate to see you go away thinking you had put anything over on me."

"You've got a fat chance of making me do anything you propose! You've shot your bolt! You're through!"

"Not quite," answered Connie. "Have you stopped to think where you would have been if I had waited and ridden down here with the inspector? The way it is, you've got at least a day or two the start of him. That's a little act of kindness, maybe, on my part. But I don't expect you will come across on that score. I knew if I came down here with nothing but bluff and bluster to back my play I wouldn't have any better chance to win out than you had."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for instance, I don't suppose you've heard that my foreman, here, Mr. Rutledge had been appointed deputy sheriff. And maybe you don't know that putting another man's brand on

your own colts with intent to injure another is a criminal offense. But it is. As you say, it is possible that when the case came to trial, you and your paid witnesses could secure your acquittal. Just suppose, though, that Mr. Rutledge should arrest you on that charge and take you back to town. With Judge Colter somewhere in the mountains fishing it might be several days before you could arrange for bail. In the meantime we will just suppose that the inspector has arrived from Washington—" The sentence was interrupted by a sharp click, as the major jerked the telephone receiver from its hook and called central in a voice that had lost its bluster.

"Hello, this is Major Hogan. Can you get the sheriff again? What? Horseback? Well, yell at him! It's important." Several moments of silence followed, and at length the voice spoke again! "Hello, McLaughlin? Yes. Lucky she caught you. Said you were just riding by. It's about that Dick Grey case. I want you to fix it up to have that charge withdrawn. Yes, that's right—withdrawn. I just found out it was a mistake. Yes. Get it off the books, will you? Yes. I'll explain next time I see you. Glad I

saved you the ride. Good Bye." Reaching into his desk the man withdrew a check book, and without looking up, asked: "How much did you say that was—for those steers?"

"There have been twelve head butchered that we know of, and I figure them at forty dollars," answered Connie. "That's—let's see—it's four hundred and eighty dollars, isn't it?"

Without answering, the man wrote out the check and handed it to Connie who folded it carefully and placed it in his pocket. "Thank you, Major," he said. "And, now, if you'll turn Dick loose, I guess we'll be going."

That evening as the three sat down to supper in the Chinaman's restaurant in Red Bank, the door opened and Sheriff McLaughlin looked in. Connie motioned him to the empty chair opposite: "Come on, Sheriff, have supper with us!"

"Don't know but what I will," answered the officer, as he seated himself, and shook the hand that Dick Grey had outstretched: "Glad to see you, Dick!"

Dick grinned: "An' I'm gladder to see you, Mac, than any time for the last six months. You

give me a narrow squeak one time. Down in Black Coulee, it was, about three months ago. You rode past within arm's reach of me!"

"Uh-huh," answered the sheriff. "An' if I hadn't know'd you wasn't no more a horse-thief than what I am, I'd of retched out my arm an' nabbed you. I couldn't hardly keep from laughin' when I was goin' past."

"You know'd I was there!" cried Grey in such evident surprise that the others all laughed.

"Say, son," grinned the sheriff, "next time you want to hide from anyone, an' it's a sunshiney day, jest you either pull them silver *conchos* off'n yer chaps, or else cover 'em up. I rode up that coulee fer a half a mile or more, with about eight of them *conchos* a-flickerin' in my eyes like a row of street lamps. But, how come you an' Morgan hooked up?"

Connie, himself told the story of the poison spring, and Tex followed it with a glowing account of the interview with Major Hogan. "But, what I can't figger out," he concluded, turning to Connie, "is how in thunder you got such quick action with the Indian Department in Washington?"

"Indian Department?" said the boy, "I never had anything to do with the Indian Department. All I said was just what your friend the agency clerk told you—that the department didn't know anything about the Round Seven cattle being on the reservation, and that they thought there were only five thousand head of PU. cattle there, and that they didn't know that the Major was manager of the PU."

"But—you said there would be an inspector——"

"Oh, no, I didn't!" smiled the boy. "Do you know, I believe maybe the Major thought I said that, too. But what I really said was that an inspector ought to be along tomorrow or next day if he had started from Washington yesterday. Which is a perfectly evident fact to anyone who will take the trouble to figure it out."

"You mean," cried Tex, staring in open-mouthed astonishment, "that it was all a bluff?"

"Just a bluff," answered the boy. "I told the sheriff that I believed the easiest man in the world to bluff was the man who bluffed most himself. Didn't I, sheriff?"

"You sure did," admitted the officer. "But,

believe me, I never thought you could work it on *him!*"

Tex roared with laughter: "An' on top of that he makes him turn Dick Grey loose, and pay fer the steers the Injuns killed! He told him I was a deputy sheriff——"

"No, no! Tex! Why, that would have been a lie! All I said was that I didn't suppose he had heard that you had been appointed deputy sheriff. In fact, he couldn't have heard it. You never have been appointed a deputy sheriff."

Another roar of laughter greeted the words, and Tex asked: "But how did you know that things would break just right, like Judge Colter bein' off fishin' so it would take several days to get bail."

Connie shook his head, sadly: "Tex, there is something wrong with your hearing. I didn't say Judge Colter was away fishing. Only that 'with Judge Colter away fishing, it would take several days to get bail,' and, it would, wouldn't it sheriff?"

"It surely would, son," answered McLaughlin. And, as they all rose from the table, he turned to Dick Grey, with a grin: "I was jest a-wonderin',

Dick, how you was goin' to like yer new boss."

"Huh," answered Grey, as he set his Stetson firmly upon his head, "if he don't fire me first, he's goin' to have to bury me when I git an old, old man!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE COWBOYS HELP OUT

CONNIE, and Tex, and Dick Grey returned to the Round Seven ranch to find the riders already beginning to assemble for the beef round-up. Some there were who had ridden the spring round-up, for Tex had only held over a few of his best men. But there were new faces, also, riders who had never before worked for the Round Seven. Campbell, and Samuels were on hand, glad of the chance to earn a little money, and at the same time gather their own beef for shipment with the Round Seven stuff, an opportunity that had never been accorded them under Harmon's management.

After supper as Connie and Tex were seated upon the edge of the porch planning the round-up, Tombstone joined them, the inevitable spear of hay dangling loosely from between his lips.

"How they comin', Tombstone?" asked Tex. "Got the hay all up, yet?"

Tombstone regarded the range foreman with a glance of pity: "That 'ud be you, settin' there with more men on yer hands than you know what to do with, askin' me if the hay's all up, which I'm workin' practically, what you might say, short handed. Things is runnin' behind. I don't know what we're all a-comin' to. But, I got two good weeks' hayin' still onto my hands, an' besides which, they's them two eighty-rod stretches of fencin' to do, if we don't want them new ditches all tromped flat. Then on top of that they's the plowin' an' seedin' the field down to hay. They ain't nobody, without it's a wagon boss, that's ever ketched up with his work."

Tex laughed: "For a first class, right an' left handed pessimist I'll back you agin the world! But, you spoke a true word when you said I've got more men on my hands than I know what to do with. I won't be ready to pull the wagons fer a week yet on account of havin' to catch up a few more horses off the range fer the *remuda*. I only need two or three boys with me, an' that'll leave a dozen or so, countin' a few that ain't showed up

yet, with nothin' to do but hang around the ranch. Suppose I was to turn 'em all over to you, would it help you out any?"

Tombstone shifted the stalk of hay to the opposite corner of his mouth and nodded thoughtfully: "Yes, if I hed ten or a dozen good men fer a week I could clean up the hay, an' the heft of the fencin' to boot. But them there cowboys ain't goin' to jump in an' tackle no hayin' an' fencin' job. They think they're too good fer to do ranch hand's work."

"Well, maybe," admitted Tex. "Sometimes, though, it depends on who wants 'em to, an' how you go at 'em. Layin' around doin' nothin' fer a week gets kind of monotonous, an' besides if they go to work their pay starts now, instead of when the wagons pull. I'll slip down to the bunk house d'rectly an' see how it strikes 'em."

"Chances is, 'twon't do no good," forboded Tombstone. "Them cowboys is upity. Though why they'd ruther set in a saddle on top of one of them cayuses from sun-up till dark, than work in the hay field is more'n what I know. Personal, I'd as lief someone was to turn me over a wagon tongue an' pound me with a post maul. Ranch

work is easy an' it's safe, both of which ridin' ain't neither one. They ain't none of them cowboys knows what minute he's goin' to git his neck broke, or git landed into a prickly pear patch, on account his horse steps into a dog-hole an' breaks his leg. An' besides that they got to live off'n alkali water, an' crawl out to stand guard nights, an' sleep, rain or shine, with their beds on the hard ground. It's plumb redic'lus fer a job—but, at that, I bet they won't none of 'em do ranch work, even fer a week."

"We'll give 'em a chance," grinned Tex, and rising abruptly, walked to the bunk house in front of which four cowboys were pitching horse shoes, while others sprawled about, or busied themselves with repairing their gear. The foreman plunged directly into his subject:

"When I told you-all to show up here around this time I expected we'd be ready to pull the wagons *pronto*. But, the facts is, we won't be ready to pull for a week, yet. We would of be'n if the big boss hadn't dropped his own business to step out of his way an' do a good turn to a common cow puncher. You-all know Dick Grey, there, an' you-all know how Major Hogan had him out-

lawed. The whole thing was a frame-up to git Dick's claim fer the PU. It would of worked, too, if the big boss hadn't happened onto Dick down in the bad lands when he was huntin' horses. When he heard the facts, horse-huntin' stopped on the Round Seven long enough for the boss to go after Hogan. He got him, too. Hogan's gone. He's headed somewhere's, travelin' light, an' travelin' fast. An' Dick Grey ain't outlawed no longer, an' his claim's safe. Hogan was the last one to make the mistake of playin' the big boss for a kid, 'cause he looks like one. It took the boss jest two days to git the man that's bluffed the whole country fer twenty years. He's got more brains in a minute than Hogan know'd there was. Ask Bob Harmon, an' his gang of rustlers. Ask Curry, which he claimed his name was Wadell, an' ondertook to horn the big boss out of six-thousan' dollars by sellin' him some of his own land. An' ask a lot of the other fake nesters that tried to slip one over on him. The nesters is gone. The rustlers is gone. An' now, Hogan's gone.

"But, I didn't come down here jest to brag up the big boss. He don't need no braggin' up

from me. What I'm gittin' at is this: They was a little trouble with the hay crew, which the boss handled a bunch of them here I. W. Ws. jest like he handled the rest of the crooks, but it set him back a little with his hayin', an' some fence buildin'. You-all could help him out a whole lot if you'd start in from now till when the wagons pull, an' work on the ranch. I ain't askin' any rider to do a ranch hand's work that don't want to. Them that does, their pay starts tomorrow mornin'. Them that don't is welcome to stay here jest the same till the wagons pull. You can take yer pick, only I'd like to know how many of you-all we can count on for the work."

"Talkin' about me," spoke up Dick Grey, "I'm a cow hand, an' I ain't never done no ranch work fer any man. But if it'll help out the big boss any, I'll shovel hay from now till Chris'mus."

"Me, too," agreed Campbell. "Before now, the Round Seven has always scattered my stuff as fer as they could all over the range. But now the orders is to shove it back, even if the boys has to go out of their way to do it."

"Same here," seconded Samuels. "It's costin'

Morgan money to turn us nesters' stock back fer us, an' any big owner that'll do that don't need to go beggin' fer hands while I'm around."

"Show us the hay!" exclaimed a lean cow puncher whose bowed legs indicated that he had been a rider almost from infancy. "I don't reckon they's none of us here that's so delycate that a week's hayin' an' post hole-diggin' is goin' to hurt him none. If a bird's right, no matter if he's owner of a big outfit, er who he is, I'm willin' to go out of my way to help him out—an' I reckon we all feel about the same way."

The others agreed to a man, and Tex returned to the house and resumed his seat where Connie and Tombstone awaited him.

"All right, Tombstone," he announced, "you can spread out yer thinkin' apparatus to cover a double crew. The boys figure they'd all like to do ranch work till the wagons pull."

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" cried Tombstone, for once in his life deigning to show surprise. "First time I ever know'd cowboys that was willin' to freeze onto a fork handle or a post hole auger. Must be the world's comin' to an end, or somethin'. Chances is they'll be so many of 'em,

they'll be gittin' in each other's road, or it'll haul off an' rain, or somethin'."

"But, if they don't get in each other's road, an' it don't rain you'll get quite a lot of work done, won't you?"

"Yes, that is if somethin' else don't come along. When things looks good then's when you got to look out. I remember how it was with my Uncle Joe. He was ailin' fer a good long spell. The doctors claimed they wasn't nothin' the matter of him, but Uncle Joe, he know'd different. One mornin' he gits up an' eats his breakfast an' when he'd got through he says: 'Seems like I kind of feel a little better today than what I've felt sence, it's eleven year an' four month, come day after tomorrow,' he says, jest like that. 'Guess I'll hitch up an' drive to town,' he says. So he hetch up the old mare an' driv to town, an' when he got there, along come a train an' hit the rig an' killed him dead, an' her, both. An' that's what a man git's fer claimin' he feels good."

"Who's *her?*" asked Tex.

"Why the old mare, of course. 'Course everyone know'd that Uncle Joe's misery wasn't nothin' but laziness. He'd be'n livin' off his relatives fer

years—an' folks claimed he seen the train comin' an' was jest nach'lly too lazy to reach out an' hit the old mare an extry lick to git her off'n the track. But we soo'd the railroad an' got a thousan', dollars fer Uncle Joe, an' a hundred fer the mare which she was spavined an' had the heaves an' better'n twenty year of age onto her, an' fifty dollars fer the buggy, an' fifty more fer the harness, which it was mostly clothes-line an' bailin' wire anyhow—so we kind of figgered we got a long price fer the whole outfit—but, that's what a man gits."

Tex laughed: "Well, Tombstone, if you stick to the hay fields between now an' round-up I'll guarantee they won't be no railroad train come down here an' git you."

"Huh," grunted Tombstone, lugubriously. "They's other things besides railroad trains." He stood up, and mouthing his straw, started for the bunk house muttering something about not having teams enough to keep such a big crew busy.

Connie and Tex laughed heartily when the doleful one had passed out of hearing. "Poor Tombstone," said Connie. "Don't he ever get any enjoyment out of living?"

"Sure he does," answered Tex. "That's where

he gets his enjoyment. He gets pleasure out of lookin' on the dark side of things, same as we do out of lookin' on the bright side. It's an idiosyncrasy in his mental complex—how's that fer a wagon boss? But, you recollect I told you that I was onct educated out of a couple years' growth. If you walk through the mud with a pair of new boots on, fer a long time afterward you'll be findin' chunks of dry mud still stickin' to 'em— that mental complex stuff's one of the chunks. Bein' interpreted into English it means, there's a kink in his works that's throw'd his imagination around, hind side to. It's like crossin' the bridle reins an' tryin' to drive a horse. See what I mean? Neither do I. But anyway, he's a blame good ranch foreman, long as you don't have to listen to him talk. Guess I'll roll in, now. Want to pull out by daylight. You better stay here an' kind of keep an eye on things. The boys all like you—even them that don't know you, an' it might be you could kind of smooth things over if Tombstone gits on their nerves—they don't savvy him, much—cowboys favorin' lightheartedness more'n what he does. Good night. Be back in three or four days with a bunch of broncs to bust."

CHAPTER XXII

A RIDING JOB

SOON after dinner the following day two riders, their bedrolls upon the back of a pack-horse, drew up and dismounted near the blacksmithshop of the Round Seven, where Samuels and Red Carney were busy repairing the grub wagon.

"Where's Tex?" asked one.

"Huntin' horses," answered Samuels.

"Which my name's Tom King, an' hisn's Leander Stot," introduced the cow puncher. "We rode the calf round-up fer Y Bar Pierson over agin' the Highwoods. Which they don't only shove you three meals a day on the round-up—hot beans, cold beans, an' sour beans."

"An' the cook's a breed, an' the bread ain't done in the middle, an' they feed you tea to drink," interrupted Stot, with disgust.

"An' their horses is so tall you got to have a

ladder to fork 'em, an' you wear kidney sores onto 'em where yer spurs comes."

"An' they roust you out so early in the mornin' you got to light matches to tell what you're gittin' hold of in the horse corral. Tex he hired us fer to ride the beef round-up on the Round Seven."

"Wagons'll pull in about a week," informed Samuels.

"Where's the rest of the riders? Ain't they no one showed up yet?"

"Oh, yes, 'bout fifteen er so. Me an' Red, here's two of 'em. The rest of the boys is in the hay field, or buildin' fence."

"Hayin' an' fencin'!" cried King, in surprise. "Say, what kind of an outfit is this here? Makin' riders do ranch hand's work. Well, here's two that won't freeze onto no fork handle, nor punch no post holes in the ground, neither, nor likewise string no wire! Even Y Bar Pierson never tried that game. Where's the big boss? I ain't afraid to tell it to him, same as I've told it to you."

Samuels jerked his thumb toward Connie, who was turning his horse into the corral after a ride through the hay fields: "He's over yender."

"What! You don't mean that kid?"

"Well," replied Samuels, picking up his hammer, and drawing a piece of glowing iron from the forge, "some might call him that. Other folks has kind of learnt to think of him in bigger figgers."

"They ain't no man kin make me pitch hay er do fencin'—let alone a kid."

"Mebbe," admitted Samuels, and a shower of sparks flew about him as his hammer descended upon the iron.

The two cow punchers strolled over to the horse corral from which Connie was emerging, bridle in hand. "Morning, boys," he greeted. "Just turn your horses into the corral and we'll go up to the house and see if we can't rustle something to eat."

"You the big boss?"

"Yes. You can roll your beds off at the bunk house."

"I ain't so sure about rollin' off them beds. We mightn't be goin' to stop."

"Oh, I thought you were to ride for the Round Seven. We were expecting a few more men to show up. The wagons won't pull for about a week."

"That's what we thought we come here fer.

King's my name, an' this here's Leander Stot, which we're cow hands an' ain't ranch hands. The party that's blacksmithin' over there says how all the riders is fightin' hay, er jobbin' post holes through the sod. Where we come from ranch hands does such like, an' riders rides. We don't figger to pitch no hay, nor neither we don't do no fencin'."

"That's all right," smiled Connie. "Just put up your horses. Nobody works around this outfit unless they want to. Just come up to the house when you get through and I'll see if I can rustle a cold bite."

The boy turned away. King looked at Stot and Stot looked at King. "How about it?" asked Stot. "Me—I'm hongry."

"If we throw off them beds, they ain't no law we can't throw 'em on agin'. Bite of hay won't hurt the cayuses none, neither."

"He says they don't no one work around this outfit onless'n they want to."

"First time I ever seen a place where they didn't no one work but them that wanted to—an' everyone workin', even riders. Must be a bunch of pilgrims."

"That there Tex ain't no pilgrim—not what you'd notice, he ain't. An' that bird that's blacksmithin', he ain't, neither—by the looks of him."

King grinned: "Mebbe we better hadn't go up an' eat nothin'. Mebbe he slips somethin' into the grub that makes folks want to work."

"I'll take a chanct," laughed Stot, as he swung his saddle to the ground. "I've got the first time yet to hear myself hollerin' fer work to do, outside of ridin'."

After the lunch which Walt Jones placed upon the table had disappeared, Connie waved his hand toward the bunk house: "Just make yourselves at home," he smiled. "Spread your beds in any of the empty bunks that suit you. The rest of the boys are all working. They figured they would rather have their pay start now instead of waiting till the wagons pull out. But, it's all the same to me if you boys would rather rest up for a few days. We've got plenty of grub here, and you'll find cards and dominoes, and checkers, and horseshoes down at the bunk house."

They had stepped out onto the porch, and King hitched at his chaps: "Two-handed cards ain't

no fun, an' dominoes is fer Greasers, an' we don't savvy checkers, an' pitchin' horseshoes gits tiresome fer an all day job."

"Well, you can sleep, or do anything else you want to."

"Man can't sleep fer a week," commented Stot. "I wouldn't mind havin' my pay start in now, neither. I'm broke. Say, boss, ain't you got a job of ridin' to do? Anythin' jest so it's handlin' stock of some kind. Ain't you got nothin' to throw in, or throw out? Or, no broncs to bust? Or nothin' a cow-hand kin do to fill in the time?"

"Rather do any kind of a riding job than work in the hay fields, or help with the fencing?" asked the boy.

"I'll tell a hand, we would."

"Well," reflected Connie, "I ran onto an old cow this morning, a couple of miles up the creek, that don't look like she's doing well. You might catch up a couple of saddle horses and bring her down and throw her on water just this side of the hay field gate. The feed's good in there, and she may pick up."

Connie grinned to himself as both men started for the corral with alacrity. "Better take it kind

of easy with her, boys," he cautioned. "She isn't in very good shape."

"We savvy the doggies, all right," reassured King, "we'll fetch her in."

And a few minutes later, as the two riders dashed past the house with a whoop on their way up the creek, Connie Morgan grinned again.

That evening the men from the fields, after much noisy splashing at the wash bench, trooped into supper. When the meal was half over Samuels glanced up and down the table: "They was a couple of *hombres* drifted in this afternoon fer to ride the round-up. They allowed they didn't have no appetite fer ranch work. Guess they must of drifted on."

"They's a couple extry beds layin' down by the bunk house, an' a pack horse, an' couple of strange ridin' horses in the corral," ventured Dick Grey.

"I guess they'll be along soon," explained Connie. "You see, I wanted to hold them for the round-up, and they didn't want to do anything but ride, so I sent them on a little job up the creek."

Down by the bunk house, as darkness settled, one of the cowboys who had been working in the hay field, voiced the thought that had been in

many minds: "We're riders, same as them two is. Looks like if hayin' an' fencin' was good enough fer us, it's good enough fer them, too. We git here first, an' then them two comes along an' gits a ridin' job, an' we shovel hay."

Dick Grey bristled immediately: "What's eatin' you?" he asked, truculently, "You don't have to sweat no harder 'cause someone else is doin' somethin' else, do you? Me— I was satisfied to work at hayin' to help the boss out to-day, an' I'll be satisfied to do it to-morrow. It don't make no difference to me what he sets other folks to doin'. That's his business. An' you can take it from me, he's the best doggone boss in Montany. You're lucky you lit here, no matter what he puts you at. If he figgers that's the only way he can hold them birds, it's all right with me. You bet!"

"What in thunder's that a-comin'?" asked Campbell staring through the dark at a slowly moving blur that had come into sight a short distance up the creek.

The blur resolved itself into figures, and Samuels gave a low exclamation: "Good gosh! Boys, it's them two riders, an' they're bringin' in old Eva,

head an' tail! Oh, my granmammy! I mistrusted the boss was up to somethin'. He was too blame sober about that there explainin'. Shut up, all of you, an' make his play good! Don't pay no 'tention to 'em."

The two riders were almost abreast of the bunk house, where twenty men stood and solemnly watched their progress along the road that led down the creek toward the hay field. What they saw was a rider with his rope around the horns of an old cow which was close-snubbed to his saddle horn. Following him was another rider with the cow's tail snubbed to the horn of his saddle. The cow had braced herself grotesquely against any foreward motion, and was being pulled and pushed down the road by main force, taking stiff-legged, reluctant steps as the horses passed slowly along the road.

"What's the boss's game? An' what's this here old Eva business?" asked the cowboy who had registered his complaint about the newcomers being given riding jobs.

Samuels grinned broadly: "They was playin' the boss fer a kid, which he's got more brains into his head than some folks has got hay. I mistrust

he's outguessed 'em. He give 'em a ridin' job all right! That there old cow they fetched in is an old milk cow that got locoed six or seven year ago, an' they turned her out, an' she's be'n hangin' around the same bend of the crick ever sence. They's a patch of loco weed on the side of a little butte clost by, an' she's got a path wore between it an' the water." With grins and chuckles, and digs in the ribs, the cowboys and ranch hands who had gathered around showed their appreciation of Connie's joke on the men who had refused to work in the fields. "They'll be back, d'rectly," continued Samuels, "an' we don't want to let on we seen nothin' out of the ordinary about draggin' in a locoed cow. I got a hunch the boss ain't through with 'em yet. It's up to us to keep our mouth shet—onless'n they catch up their own private horses, an' throw their beds on their pack horse—then we'll cut loose an' laugh 'em off'n the ranch."

After breakfast the following morning Samuels, who was still tinkering about the grub wagon, managed to edge into hearing as the two men reported to Connie at the corral. "Well, did you get her in all right?" asked the boy.

"Yeh, we fetched her in," answered King, as he stooped to loosen the rope from his saddle preparatory to entering the corral. "I hope you ain't got no more like her to fetch in to-day. If you have, we'll hitch up a team of work horses an' drag 'em in on a stone boat."

"No, I don't think there are any more to bring in. You won't have any very hard riding to do to-day. Just ride herd on the one you brought in yesterday. I don't want to lose her, now we've got her here." Samuels dived into the blacksmith-shop where he stuffed his bandana into his mouth to keep from bursting into unseemly laughter.

"Say," cried Stot, "what d'you mean ride herd! Why, that old critter is locoed so bad she can't hardly stand on her feet, let alone go no place! I bet she ain't moved ten foot from where she bedded down las' night!"

"Maybe not," answered Connie, "but I don't want her to pull out on us. That's the only riding job I've got, and there won't be much work to it. Only, don't lose sight of her for a minute. You better come in one at a time to dinner and supper. One of you can hold her while the other one eats. We won't bother about standing night

guard, though. I don't think she'll try to pull after she beds down."

Connie saddled his own horse and rode away. "Well, I'll be doggoned!" muttered Stot, as he led a Round Seven horse from the corral.

"You an' me—both!" seconded King, as he threw his saddle on another.

"'Course it's his money he's payin' out fer wages. An' if he wants to pay two men fer holdin' that ol' cow, it ain't none of our business."

"No—but, jest between you an' me—that kid ain't got all his buttons."

Through a chink in the blacksmithshop wall Samuels, convulsed with suppressed mirth, watched the two ride away down the creek, to take their places on herd, in full sight of the hay and fencing crews. Soon thereafter he found excuse to visit the hay field, and later the fencing crew, where he spake after this fashion: "The lid's off, fer as kiddin' them birds goes. The boss has got 'em ridin' herd on that ol' Eva! The way I got it sized up, if he hadn't wanted 'em kidded he wouldn't had 'em throw her in where the hull outfit could see 'em. I dang near busted tryin' to keep from laughin' when he told 'em they had to

come fer meals, one to a time, so the other one could hold herd. You'd ort to seen their faces! An' the boss, he kep' his'n as straight, an' talked as serious as a preacher. He's got 'em plumb fooled—they think he's more locoed than what old Eva is!"

At noon the crews came in from the fields, riding on hayracks, and as they passed the two riders who had spent the entire morning watching the old cow which had not moved from the spot where she stood with nose to the ground, they cut loose with a perfect volley of advice: "You hadn't ort to be off yer horse!" "Suppose she'd charge!" "Lookout fer a stampede!" "You hadn't ort to smoke, you might start the hull herd!" "She looks like she was on the prod!" "Her hair looks rough, you'd ort to bring out a curry comb!" "Sing her to sleep, an' then one of you kin come on in to dinner!" "Try blindfoldin' her, an' she'll be easier to hold!"

"Eva. Eva.
Oh, my heart's a palpitatin'
All the time that I'm a waiting'
For my E-e-e-e-va."

sang one, joyously.

The wagons passed on, leaving Stot and King guarding the old cow in stony silence. When the rattle of the returning wagons sounded from up the creek, King called across to Stot: "I'm goin' to dinner! Be back d'rectly."

In the dining room he ate alone, served by Walt Jones whose face was imperturbable as a face of stone. "Say, what in thunder is this place, a ranch, er a lunatic asylum?" questioned King, as he finished his meal.

The cook regarded him gravely. "This is a ranch," he explained. "The lunatic asylum is down to Warm Springs. You git off at the deppo, an'——"

"You go to thunder!" And as King banged the door behind him, Walt Jones, grinned broadly.

At supper time Connie was surprised to see that both Stot and King had taken their places with the others at the table. Seeing the eyes of the boy upon them, King explained: "We lost the herd, boss."

"Lost it?" asked Connie, gravely.

Producing a flaming bandana, Stot dabbed at his eyes, and between sniffling sobs blurted out: "Little Eva's passed away!"

"Passed away! You mean she's dead?"

"Dead as Cleopatra—an' twict as respected," announced King, gravely, "The end come, peacable an' quiet at 4:15 this P.M."

"But what killed her?"

"It might of be'n the sudden takin' away of her drug. I regret to report she was an addick."

"Or," ventured Stot, "it might of be'n suicide."

"Or, maybe," supplemented King, "it was a fit of rage an' shamefulness over some an' sundry of remarks that was passed in her hearin'."

"Or, it might of be'n a gun shot wound at the hands of a person, or persons onknown," suggested Stot, "or jest plain lonesomeness. We didn't hold no reg'lar inquish, nor no post mortoriam. Anyways, she ain't lived her life in vain, as the feller says. You win, boss! You got us fair an' square. It took us quite a while to savvy you,—but we ain't like a feller that can't take a joke, jest because it's on him. Anyone that kin put anything over with as straight a face as you done, is good enough fer us to work fer—an' if these other birds, here, ain't none too good to go into the hay field, we ain't neither. So if you got a couple extry

pitch forks handy, we'll lean on 'em tomorrow—if it's suitable to you."

The man's last words were hardly audible in the roars of laughter that filled the room—the whole-hearted laughter of appreciation and comradery. For not a man in the room but felt, that the two had come through a trying situation with flying colors.

"You're good sports," grinned Connie, when finally he could make himself heard. "The Round Seven is glad to have you on the payroll."

A long-drawn "Ye-a-a-a!" rose from twenty throats, and when it subsided the voice of King could be heard as he looked across the table at Samuels.

"But—makin' us ride herd on one old cow—ain't that the limit?"

CHAPTER XXIII

CONNIE LISTENS TO A PROPOSITION

At the sound of wheels rattling over the gravel of the creek bed, Connie and Tex turned from the corral where they had been inspecting the new saddle horses, to greet Two Dot Townsend who, with a younger man, was just alighting from a spring wagon.

"Hello, Morgan," grinned Two Dot. "They tell me you be'n sort of makin' history down here on the South Slope sence you come."

"What do you mean?" asked the boy.

"Well, the talk goes that there's some folks that was inhabited down this way that's changed their residence fer a spell, an' likewise I heard this mornin' that they's a new agent over on the reservation."

Connie laughed: "I told you, when you were driving me out here, the day I hit the country,

that I was going to find out what the trouble was, and then make the Round Seven pay——"

"Yes, an' I figgered you had about as much chanst of doin' anything with that there hard-b'iled outfit as you would of makin' a North Dakoty flat out of the Bear Paw Mountains. You've done a big job, son, an' you done it quick, an' thorough. Choteau County started in to laugh at you—but they ain't laughin' now. Which reminds me I plumb fergot to make you acquainted with my brother-in-law here. Bill McLaren, his name is. He's my wife's brother, an' he's a Gover'ment forester. He's got charge of one of these here National Forests."

Tex, who had unhitched and led Townsend's team to the stable, returned, and together the four walked over and seated themselves on the porch.

"You figger you got the Round Seven on a payin' basis, now?" asked Two Dot, puffing at a long, thin stogie.

"She'll pay, now, all right," answered Tex, "an' pay big."

"An' what you goin' to do next?" asked Two Dot, regarding Connie with a smile.

"What do you mean?" asked the boy.

"Well, I recollect you told me, speakin' about yer mines up in Alasky, that when they got to payin' big money you kind of lost intrust in 'em—kind of let yer pardner run the outfit, whiles you was generally kitin' off on side issues—like this here cattle business."

"Yes," answered Connie, seriously. "Somehow, it's the game that interests me more than the profits. After the game is won, I lose interest. I want to tackle something else. You see, I was only a little kid when I struck Alaska, and while other boys my age were playing the regular games that boys play, I was prospecting for gold. That was my game—and I played it—and I won. So, now, everything I tackle seems like a game. I play it as hard as I can. I want to win. While I am playing it, it seems the biggest, the most important thing in the world—that I should win. But, after it is won, it becomes just a machine for adding more money to a pile that's so big now I don't know what I'll ever do with it."

Two Dot nodded: "I see what you mean. I used to feel that way when I was younger. Only, I never had the brains nor the money to back up

the feelin' with. The Two Dot ranch was my game, but it's come to where I'm doggone glad she's payin' out reg'lar money. That was what I remembered you said, an' that's why I brung Bill, here, down to see you. He's got a proposition he wants to talk to you about. He come out to the ranch fer his vacation, an' he was tellin' me about this here proposition—an' I thought of you right away, so this mornin' I hooked up the team, an' we come over."

Connie laughed: "Go ahead," he invited, "I'd like to hear it. But, I may as well tell you, I won't take hold of anything big, without first consulting my partner."

Tex and Two Dot strolled over to the corral, and McLaren nodded: "Certainly, I understand that. As a matter of fact, the thing I have in mind is a very big undertaking—just how big I don't know, myself—but, it's big." The man paused and asked abruptly: "Do you know anything about timber?"

"Not much. We logged off a tract in Minnesota and made a nice profit out of it."

"What was it?"

"White pine and Norway—mostly white."

"But, you don't know anything about forestry?"

Connie shook his head: "Never even heard of it."

McLaren smiled: "Almost anyone can go onto a tract of timber and log it off, as you say, and make a profit out of it. What have you got left?"

"Got left? What do you mean?"

"I mean what have you got left up there on your timber tract? You've taken out the merchantable stuff—what's left?"

"Why—I don't know. Nothing, I guess."

"I can tell you what you've got left—what you mean by nothing. You've got a waste of slash, and stumps, and sand—and if the fire hasn't been through it yet, you've got a stand of what the natives call 'bresh.' Young poplar, and scrub oak, and wild cherry, and soft maple, with here and there a pine tree that escaped the saws of your crew, and probably a few pine seedlings. In other words you have a tract of cut-over that is about as near worthless as land can be."

"Well, what of it?" asked Connie. "I told you we got our profit out of the logs."

McLaren's face became graver: "I wondered if you were going to say that. It is the very thing

that any of the timber operators would have said a few years ago—and that most of them are saying to-day, although a few of them are beginning to see the light—to awaken to a realization of the vast importance of the problem that confronts them. It is a problem that is just as serious to the business man of New York City, and to the Iowa farmer as it is to the timber operator. You are a very young man. Your answer was thoughtless, rather than cynical. From what I have heard of you, you are a very exceptional young man—you have a shrewd, clean brain, you have the aggressiveness—the pep, as the expression goes, to accomplish the thing you go after, and you have the financial means to back up your personal qualifications."

As Connie listened he saw that McLaren was very much in earnest. Uppermost in his mind was Waseche Bill's oft repeated warning: "Look out fer these yere promoters, son. Don't never put yer name to no papers till you've looked the proposition over up an' down, an' crossways. If it's good, they c'n prove it. If it ain't, you don't want it." But, some how, this man did not look like a promotor. His grey eyes were serious—

honest, and he spoke his words with conviction. His skin was the weather-tanned skin of the outdoors man. The boy led him on: "What is this problem you spoke about?" he asked.

"Timber," answered the man. "Lumber. Where is the next generation's lumber supply coming from?"

"Why, the same place the last generation's came from, I guess. Surely there is plenty of timber."

"Where?"

"Why—everywhere. I passed through a lot of it coming here from Alaska. And there's lots left in Minnesota, isn't there?"

"None! That is, none to speak of. With the exception of a limited supply in the south, all the remaining timber is in the west—and within twenty-five years all the world will be bidding against us for what remains of that. And, the reason for it is plain. Because everyone else logged just as you logged in Minnesota. Took the timber and left a worthless waste behind you. With a senseless, I may say a criminal disregard of the future, they have taken their profit from millions of acres of forest and in its place they have left to their

sons and their daughters, a legacy of fireswept desolation!"

"What's the answer?" snapped the boy, his brain vainly grasping to visualize millions of acres of slash.

"The answer is to harvest the remaining forests instead of to demolish them. And to raise timber as a crop. Reforest the cut-over as you go along, keep out the fire—and carry that cut-over on your books as an asset, ever increasing in value, instead of a liability worse than worthless."

"Can it be done? I mean, as a practical business proposition? And show a profit as you go along?"

"Absolutely."

"I don't see how you could expect to show a profit. Why, it must take years and years for a tree to grow big enough to make a log. If you planted little trees on the cut-over it would be years before you could show any profit."

"Just so, if you started in with cut-over. Suppose, however you started in with virgin forest, harvested yearly, and reforested behind you? By the time you had gone once over the whole tract, the young stuff you first set out would be ready to cut."

"And, you are acting as agent for someone who wants to sell me a forest?"

"No! I am in charge of a National Forest—work on a salary for the United States Government. I have not one penny's worth of interest, either directly or indirectly, in any timber land, anywhere. Quite by accident, I happened, not long since, to hear of a large tract of timber—two tracts, that adjoin, to be exact, that could probably be purchased at a very reasonable figure. These tracts are held by two different outfits that have fought each other in the courts and out of them, until they are about exhausted. Neither would sell to the other, but either, so my information goes, would gladly sell to a third party."

"My interest in the proposition is merely the interest of one who sees the chance for some outfit to step in and do some real forest work. The Government is doing it. Some States are doing it. A very few individuals are doing it, in a smaller way. But this tract, the combined tracts, would be on a vastly larger scale than any private undertaking has yet attempted. I want to see someone go into a forest, not as a desperado bent on loot, but as a business man who is content to take a

reasonable profit, and at the same time build up his holdings, so that in the future, instead of a worthless tract of devastated land, he will have a property of enormous, and ever increasing value."

"But, that's a job for a trained forester."

"You can hire trained foresters."

"But, I'd want to run it, myself."

"You can learn forestry. There are several ways. Go to any one of a dozen universities. Go onto a forest as ranger, and study under the forester, as you work—come onto my forest. Or, hire a forester, and study under him on your own forest."

"How much of an investment would it take?'

"That would depend on what terms you could get. The total would involve upwards of a million —possibly two or three millions. I don't know the exact acreage, nor the stumpage scale—but it's big."

"Would you take the job?"

McLaren, taken completely by surprise by the abruptness of the question, hesitated: "Well—I —of course—I would want time to consider it. That is——"

Connie interrupted him: "Sure, I understand,"

he said, "I need time myself. You are on your vacation?"

"Yes."

"Suppose you spend the rest of it getting all the information you can about this proposition—acreage, value, cruiser's reports—everything, and keep in mind the fact that you may have to take hold of it and show me a profit—then we will get together and see whether we want to handle it. In the meantime, I'll talk it over with my partner, and I'll tell you whether or not we want to tackle it."

"But—your partner is in Alaska, isn't he."

"Sure," answered the boy, "I'm leaving to talk it over with him tomorrow—be back here in three or four weeks."

McLaren stared in amazement, as Connie called to Tex, who stood near the corral talking with Two Dot: "Hey, Tex!"

"Comin'!"

"You've got to run this outfit for three or four weeks without me. I've got to go back to Ten Bow for a little talk with Waseche Bill. I'll fix up a checking account for you in town."

"Gosh sakes!" cried the range foreman, "You

don't mean you're goin' to hit out fer Alaska on a minute's notice—like most folks would slip over to the neighbors!"

Connie laughed. "Yup. Heard about a patch of timber I may want to buy. Guess I'll saddle up, now. So long—take care of yourself." He turned to McLaren: "See you when I get back."

Ten minutes later, Connie disappeared up the trail.

McLaren looked at the others. Tex grinned: "Kind of, what you might say, abrupt ain't he—the boss? They's a whole lot of loafin' he never done."

"He's a—a whirlwind!" answered the forester, "a man would like to work for him."

"I'll tell the world a man would!" answered Tex. "If he can keep from gittin' dizzy."

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